### “Has Come to Life” Steve Finlan for The First Church, March 30, 2025

**2 Corinthians 5:17–19**

17If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

**Luke 15:11–32**

11 “There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 The younger son . . . travelled to a distant country where he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 A severe famine took place throughout that country . . . 15So he hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating . . . 17When he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!’ . . . 20So he set off, but while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21The son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him . . . 23And get the fatted calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate; 24for this son of mine was dead and is alive again. . .’

25 “Now his elder son was in the field. When he heard music and dancing, 26he asked one of the slaves what was going on. 27He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father began to plead with him, 29but he answered, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you . . . yet you have never given me even a young goat so I might celebrate. 30But when this son of yours who has devoured your property with prostitutes comes back, you kill the fatted calf for him!’ 31Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32But we had to celebrate, as this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Family is where our character formation begins to take place, for better or for worse, for conventional or for eccentric. It can give us a bit of a head start in life, or it can handicap us and make progress difficult. However, as adults, we can transcend our background. It may be difficult, but it’s not impossible, to undergo profound character transformation after you have left your family of origin. You can overcome your handicaps, or, on the other hand, you can squander your head start, if you’re lucky enough to have had one. You have the freedom to make spiritual progress.

Before we look at the gospel story of a family drama, let’s look at Paul’s remarks in his second Corinthian letter about believers being transformed. He is speaking of a transformation that happens to adults, after they have left their family of origin. Everything can become like new. It is like a new creation, he says. To announce this possibility, Paul was given a ministry of reconciliation. Contrary to the atonement theologies of later centuries, those of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, Paul does *not* say that Jesus’ death was a payment for humanity’s sin, somehow persuading God to be reconciled to humanity. Rather, what Paul tells us is that *God* was the one who was already doing the reconciling. God was *with* Jesus in his Incarnation, and God was *already* forgiving, as Jesus was. It’s in God’s merciful nature, and “all this is from God” (5:18), Paul says.

Jesus illustrates the forgiving nature of God by telling a remarkable story of forgiveness. Notice that the wayward son is filled with remorse, ashamed of himself, and prepares an apology speech, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (15:21). But the father doesn’t even want to hear it. All he cares about is that his son has come back. No apology is needed. Nor is any penance or any self-humbling imposed upon the son. He’s just kissed and lavished with honor, given a robe and a ring and a fatted calf. The father doesn’t demand any drama of submission or apology, and imposes no penalty. His forgiveness is almost reckless and limitless. Jesus is prepared to have people be surprised by the exceedingly generous nature of the Father.

In fact, this is part of what rankles the older son—such a lavish display of love for no other reason than that the wandering son has returned home. In fact, the father was “filled with compassion” from the moment he saw his son from far off (15:20). And he shows no pride or authority at all when he goes and *runs* to his son! This would be very surprising to the people who grew up in a society where the father’s honor was foremost. *This* father puts love above honor, and forgiveness above apparent propriety.

The son doesn’t have to pay for his sins or undergo a season of shame or penance. Nor does any substitute have to pay his penalty. There is no mention of a penalty. As far as the father is concerned, reconciliation has already been accomplished through the son’s return. The young man just has to come back into the family and accept his father’s love. And such love is there for us as well, and we can receive it.

The older brother, too, needs to just accept the love, and could have asked for a celebration any time he wanted, apparently. But instead of joy and open-heartedness, this brother embodies judgmentalism and pride of position. So there’s another lesson in the parable besides the loving openness of God. It’s a lesson about not being jealous or peevish, not focusing on what you think you deserve, not measuring out and judging your father’s love but just receiving it. You might think you know just what you deserve and what would be fair, but you can’t impose that judgment on God’s kingdom. Who are we to limit the infinite God? There might be some great act of mercy taking place, which it’s not your place to wreck or to judge. This is not the only parable that Jesus tells which tries to get us to let go of our judging how much we supposedly deserve.

Don’t use your sense of just deserts and of righteousness to put a damper on the joy in the father’s household. “We *had* to celebrate,” the father said (15:32). This is a mandate in the father’s household: be willing to celebrate for others, without measuring your deserts against their supposed deserts. We can’t really measure that anyway.

God just wants us to stay in the family. This involves recognizing that you need the father. There is no absolute independence. No man is an island. The father is not overly concerned about supposed just deserts or about displays of penance and sorrow. Just get back in the family and everything will be alright. In the family you will find the best conditions for your health and growth, and that’s what God wants.

Did you discover something new about God or yourself today? Perhaps we have had times when we are the returning son, are surprised at the open welcome. Perhaps we are sometimes the older son, needing to learn that the father’s love is even greater than we had thought. We needed to be instructed in it.

As we enter a season of growth, be ready to receive God’s love. And let God be as generous and hugely forgiving as God wants to be.