### “Like a Hired Hand” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Mar. 27, 2022

**Luke 15:11–19**

11Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger said, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, where he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14When he had spent it all, a severe famine took place there, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to a citizen 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; and no one gave him anything. 17But when 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! 18I will get up and go to my father, and I will say, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19I’m no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’

**Luke 15:20–32**

20So he set off and went to his father. 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. 21Then the son said to him, ‘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 a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

25 “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he approached the house, he heard music. 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 came out and began to plead with him. 29He answered his father, ‘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 that I might celebrate with my friends. 30But this son of yours came back, having devoured your property with prostitutes, and you kill the fatted calf for him!’ 31The father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ ”

This is the longest parable, and probably the richest with characters and meaning. There are several characters one can identify with: if not the risk-taking son, then the loving father, or the cautious and “good” son. I’m guessing that the people who hear the story are making certain assumptions. They probably don’t like the prodigal son character because he was quite disrespectful by asking for his inheritance while his father was still alive. They might expect the father to accept the prodigal son back, but with conditions, and maybe after a stern bawling-out. They probably expect the father to make the son *earn* his way back to full status as a son, by going through a period of penance and making good again. That’s what most of *those* fathers would have done. But Jesus’ story carries a big surprise in the way that the father runs out to meet his son, something that would be considered undignified for a father to do. The son begins his apology speech, which he had practiced, but the father cuts him off before he can finish, and orders a robe and a ring and sandals be brought out for him, and a fatted calf be slaughtered. The extravagant, unconditional welcome and joy of the father for the return of his previously disrespectful and dishonorable son is really shocking, as is the complete absence of any requirement for penance, apology, or self-humiliation.

The son is accepted back with full honors and abundant forgiveness. The father doesn’t even dwell on the issues of forgiveness or repentance. He accepts his son’s sincerity immediately and declares that there must be a celebration. He is not saying that what the son did is alright; in fact, he implies that the son’s departure was a terrible thing; he was “dead”; he was “lost.” But the father only focuses on his coming to life, his being “found,” which necessitates celebratory joy. By this time in the telling of the parable, most of the audience is probably astonished or incredulous. How could the father be so welcoming? Why does he seem to abandon all moral judgments?

I’m guessing that some in the audience identified more with the elder son, who appears in verse 25. He is disgruntled to see his bratty younger brother get all this attention. He complains to his father that he has worked like a slave for years, but his father has never so much as given him a goat for a presumably smaller celebration with his friends (15:29). He bitterly protests the celebration with the fatted calf for his brother. The father tells him that everything he has is his, implying that he *could* have asked for a goat or a calf any time he wanted. But he doesn’t focus on the negative subject of this son’s attitude, but switches to the positive. “We *had* to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (v. 32).

There is an actual imperative to celebrate! It can’t be skipped. Joy is an essential part of life in this father’s family. So the initial problem in the story, the prodigal son, is quickly solved, and a new problem emerges with the elder son’s non-cooperation with his father’s attitude. He is clearly out of step. It is crucial to welcome back the wayward son; that takes precedence over older son’s selfish obsession with whether he is getting the credit and praise he thinks he deserves. That is the attitude of a party pooper. So, don’t be a party pooper in the kingdom of God. Don’t begrudge newcomers or latecomers. Accept Jesus’ message about the father being primarily inviting and abundantly forgiving. Join in the spirit of celebration.

This parable follows after two other parables that talk about the joyous recovery of something that was lost. There was the parable of the lost sheep, where the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep who are safe and goes into the wilderness searching for the one sheep who wandered off, and when he finds it, he tells his friends to rejoice with him. Jesus concludes, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7). Then follows the parable of the lost coin, where a woman loses a coin, and sweeps and searches the house until she has found it, and tells her friends to rejoice with her over the found coin. This tells us God doesn’t want to lose anything that is valuable, and that there is joy among “the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (15:10). So also, our fatherly God rejoices over one wandering soul who decides to come back to his father’s house. That soul will be greeted not like a hired hand, but like a son.

Jesus wants us to think of God as passionately devoted to our salvation. The remote and lofty God who either thinks nothing of us or thinks of us negatively, is simply not the God whom Jesus taught. This God delights in saving, and goes out of his way to save people. He is not insecure about his authority or his honor. He does not need to protect his power or authority, or to have his honor restored. He is generous by nature.

This is the lesson he was giving the apostles that day: Get ready to change the way you think about God. Recognize that God is astoundingly generous. And don’t be attached to whether or not you’re getting enough credit. That appears in another parable, too, where the laborers who work all day are rebuked for complaining about the late-arriving laborers getting the same pay (Matt 20:13–15). Be happy that you’re being let into the vineyard; don’t complain about the equal status of others who were let in later. In fact, don’t be concerned with status at all. For “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matt 19:30). Let go of your ego.

Don’t cling to your status or your imagined status. Cling only to your loving heavenly father. And rejoice when the lost are found and sinners repent. So today’s exhortation has to do with how to think about God. Think of God as the spiritual power who seeks out the lost and the sinners, calls them back to the father’s home. All are welcome, all who are sincere in their desire to learn from God and restore the relationship. Think of God as the astonishingly generous father who wants to give blessings to all who would come. Think of God as one to whom the individual matters, the single sheep, the single coin. Maybe you know someone who occasionally looks back on their life and regrets having stopped seeking God, and misses those days when they sought to learn the spiritual truth. Maybe that person would like to come back to God, and see what they’ve been missing. We will welcome them here.

And there will be rejoicing in heaven.