

Sermon by Rev. David T. Young, preached at Hickory First Presbyterian, 16 July 2017

**“God loves me, so?”**

Luke 15: 11-32

We continue today our 6 week series entitled - *as you know* - ‘**Sharing faith the Jesus way**’...

Two weeks ago – *here in the Sanctuary* - we began the series by considering and thinking together about the story of the **Samaritan Woman** in John’s Gospel — and the significance of Jesus breaking down all manner of conventional *barriers* then and there, in that time...

And of course he did this *challenging* of cultural and religious **norms**:

- to demonstrate his love and acceptance of all people - whomever they are; wherever they have come from; however they got there; and whatever they have done...
- **the challenge of course to us**: that we, *like Jesus*, are called to share our faith with those around us:
- to accept people as they are;
- to leave behind our prejudices and our misconceptions;
- to treat every single person we meet in life with dignity and respect! /

And last Sunday – *at Kairos Worship in the Fellowship Hall (I thought the Praise Band were out of this world by the way – absolutely fantastic!)* – we heard the story in Luke’s Gospel of the man - *the paralytic* - who was literally lowered through the roof — *into the middle of an indignant crowd* — right there, in front of Jesus...

We considered how *that* story teaches us of a Jesus who was willing to **accept** the interruption; who appreciated the effort and the faith of the paralytic’s friends’ — *who had gone to such extremes to bring him to Jesus (it’s not every day that someone rips a hole in your roof to get your attention!)* — and who then responded in **love** with the command:

- “Your sins are forgiven, stand up and walk!”... /

In summary the entire theme last week a challenge – *an indictment* - to us — **to share our faith the Jesus way** — by loving others as God loves us; by meeting the needs of others - putting them - *always* - first! //

And today – *once again from the Gospel of Luke* - the theme continues through that well known and loved *Parable of the Prodigal Son* — or perhaps the *Parable of the Loving Father* — or perhaps **both!** //

Jesus was very clever in his use of parables – he used these *every day stories* - to reveal *profound* and *awesome* divine truths:

- I wonder what we can learn from this parable about ‘sharing faith the Jesus way?’ //

I am forever reminding my congregation back in Helensburgh just how right and proper – *and important* - it is for us to read a Biblical story - *always* - in context:

- so much of the **madness**, *and fanaticism*, and **extremism** we witness in our world today —
- *so much of this* is down, *fundamentally*, to people interpreting religious texts in a way that suits their own prejudice and discrimination and hate — ***now we might not be terrorists but we cannot pretend that from time to time many of us are not guilty of doing just that...***  
/

The context of today’s parable is vitally important to our understanding the meanings...

Jesus told this story because some very righteous people were upset with him...

It seems he had been spending time with the wrong kind of people:

- **tax collectors**, *who were little more than traitors in collusion with the occupying Roman army;*
- sinners - *like the Samaritan woman at the well with her immoral lifestyle...*

The religious leaders thought it a **scandal** the company Jesus kept, and Luke — earlier in his Gospel — says that they “were grumbling” about it...

***And what does Jesus do?*** Well, he decides to tell them a story. //

It’s a story about two sons, and their father... /

Of the two sons:

- the youngest is the rebellious one – *and I’m sure the parents here this morning will know what it is like to have a rebellious child...*

- He tells his father that he wants his inheritance early — he doesn't want to wait — **he wants it... and he wants it now...** /

I wonder if the younger son was surprised when his father ***gave him*** his inheritance:

- his demand was nothing like simply asking for an advance on pocket money or an allowance...

The son's request has real significance. The son is saying — ***there and then*** — to his father:

- “You are dead to me. I don't need you. I just want what will belong to me”...

And in that very moment, the son has separated himself from his father:

- ***in that very moment*** their relationship changes and is now different! /

Having — ***now*** - his share of his father's property, the son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country to engage in an immoral lifestyle! /

The son has rejected and dishonoured not only his father but the entire village:

- he has hurt, shamed, and disowned them;
- every resident of the village now stands as a reason the son cannot ever return;
- if he did he would be met with anger;
- he would be in danger....

**Everyone** — *the son himself, his brother, the slaves and hired-hands, and all the villagers* — would have thought the son was on a one-way trip., never to return:

- everyone, that is, except the father! //

What strikes me about this parable is that:

- throughout it all the father is silent;
- he asks no questions about why the son is leaving or where he is going;
- he doesn't argue or get angry;

- he doesn't try to dissuade or discourage him;
- he simply divided his property between the two sons! //

*I wonder how many of you have at some point in your life ran off from something - to the proverbial 'distant country'? /*

I remember many years ago — *as a very, very young boy* — simply thinking that I had to get away....

I'd been outside playing with my friends... *we'd got up to mischief*... and I decided I needed to leave - there was no other way...

I remember vividly, with pencil and paper in hand... going to my mum and asking,

***“How do you spell running?”***

R U N N I N G

***“Ok, thanks... How do spell away?”***

A W A Y...

I finished my note, handed it to my mum, and in my head was off to a distant country to escape her wrath:

- ***after all that is what the bad sons do – or so we have come to believe!*** //

For so long we have heard and understood this story as one about sin...

We hold the two sons up as examples:

- the younger son — ***the bad son*** — runs away and squanders the money doing some self-indulgent, pretty rotten and stupid things;
- the older son — ***the good son*** — was always at home. He never disobeyed...

The implication might seem obvious:

- be the obedient ***slave-like*** child to your Heavenly Father and all will be well...

But the difficulty is... that the whole good and bad dichotomy ***rarely transforms lives:***

- Love, ***however***, can and **does** transform lives! //

Might it be, that — in considering our theme of ‘*sharing faith the Jesus way*’ — this story is more about the **father** than it is about the sons:

- might it be, this story is about **love** and **grace** more than it is about sin? /

Jesus introduces this story by saying, “*There was a man*”...

From the very beginning the focus is on the father:

- although we do hear about the **son’s** journey, it is always in relation to the **father**;
- the father is the one who made it **possible** for the son to leave...

*But if to any extent this parable is about the sons it is primarily about the sons as recipients of the father’s **love!*** //

The **father’s** love is so strong and so big that it does not possess the other; but is willing to let go...

The **father’s** love is so strong and so big that it makes no demands but is willing to wait patiently...

The **father’s** love is a love that forgives and welcomes home with arms out-stretched... /

But there is a rub...and here it is:

- the **father’s** love is also a love that will **not** rescue us out of or stop us from going to that proverbial ‘distant country’:
- **instead:** it is a love that redeems the time spent and the life lived in that place;
- And that is **good news** for those of us who travel to the distant country — and we will, all of us, go there at some point! //

So, Jesus told a story about two sons and their father:

- another parable of the unlikeliest people in the unlikeliest of places who demonstrate God’s love in the unlikeliest of ways! //

How do you relate to the characters in this story?

Are you the ‘loving father’, figure?

Are you the ‘wayward son’?

Are you the jealous, envious, angry brother? /

In what way does this parable — *about God’s unconditional love for you* — speak to you this morning?

What does it say to you about some of the situations or frustrations you’re dealing in your own life at the moment? /

How does this wonderful story told by Jesus *challenge* you to share the faith you’ve found - the Jesus way?

Something to think about!

**AMEN**