



feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading. (Isaiah 40:11)

May 21, 2013

Dear Church Family,

In our narrative study of Luke we arrived at what is probably the most beloved passage in the gospel, popularly known as the Story of the Prodigal Son. We looked at what reading it in the context of a narrative study adds to our understanding of this familiar parable. The occasion for Jesus telling this story is the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. We have already seen this issue addressed in Luke. In chapter 5 Jesus answers “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” Jesus has come to call sinners, not because he does not care that they are sinners, but precisely because they are sinners. His goal is for them to become well through repentance. Health and sickness is an instructive analogy. The Pharisees viewed these sinners as sick as well, but sick with a contagious disease. Their main response was one of protecting the larger community from their disease. That is why they were treated as outcasts. Jesus had more compassion on sinners, seeking to heal and restore them as he did the leper (a notoriously contagious disease) in the previous healing story. And in the end of chapter 7 Jesus has taught that his ministry of forgiveness will in fact heal and restore sinners, creating lovers of God. His statement in 7:35, “Yet wisdom is justified by all her children”, is an answer to the Pharisees’ concern that his offer of forgiveness to sinners will lead to more sinful behavior. As demonstrated by the encounter with the sinful woman at the home of Simon the Pharisee, those who are forgiven much respond with much love while those who are forgiven little, love little.

So as we pick up this issue again, we have already seen that the religious leaders are wrong in their concern about Jesus’ relationship with sinners. Jesus knows what he is doing and his ministry to sinners is producing good fruit in devoted followers like this woman. In chapter 15, Jesus answers the objection by focusing not on the fruit of his ministry to sinners but on the heart of God that is behind it, particularly God’s heart toward sinners. The first two parables, with the lost sheep and lost coin, establish that God views sinners as lost and they are precious to Him and He wants to recover them. Jesus makes it clear after each parable that sinners, who are lost, are found when they repent. This continues a consistent theme in Luke on the importance of repentance which begins with John the Baptist proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. The parables of the lost sheep and coin convey the heart of God, but they raise two questions. How is it that sinners are valuable to God? Sheep and coins have obvious value but why does God value sinners? The Pharisees obviously did not consider sinners to have value but perceived them primarily as a threat. The second question is what is the nature of a repentance described as a sinner being found? We looked at how the story of the father and his two sons answers those questions.

Jesus deliberately tells this story so that the younger son is a pretty despicable character. The more familiar we are with the culture of the time, the more we realize that this son treats his father in an outrageously shameful manner. In our modern reading of the parable, do we actually end up rooting for the younger son, celebrating his restoration after screwing up so badly? Is that why it is popularly titled the parable of the Prodigal Son? Because if we do, we have missed the point. The celebration is for the father getting his lost son back, not for the son. The younger son is not a sympathetic character. This is why the compassion of the father is so remarkable. The word for compassion is an active word; it literally means to be powerfully moved so that mercy or compassion are stirred up and brought forth. But what brings them forth here? Jesus has told the story so that there is nothing in the younger son that merits or draws out compassion, not even his repentance, which appears to be self serving. The father’s compassion is not

dependent at all on the conduct or character of the son. It simply exists within him and responds to his son's suffering. So the value of the son has nothing to do with the son at all. It is simply and entirely due to the way that the father feels about the son, and the conduct of the son has not diminished those feelings. They are still strong enough that he runs when he sees his son approaching, breaking all bounds of propriety in that culture. This conveys how God feels about sinners who are lost to him.

But what does this story teach about repentance, the key to lost sinners being found? The story ends with the older son as the one who is lost and needs to repent to be found. The fact that Jesus ends the story with the response of the older son as an open question is an example of grace, the same type of grace that causes him to eat with sinners. Jesus' heart for the Pharisees, even in their outrageous treatment of him, is the same as his heart for sinners. He is still trying to call them to repentance so that they too can be restored to relationship with God.

But what is the nature of the younger son's repentance? It certainly pales in comparison with the repentance we have just seen in Psalm 51. It appears to be motivated more by what is self-serving than a contrite heart. Yet the younger son is found and the father rejoices over a restored relationship because the son has repented of his path that took him away from the father and has returned home. This decision to return was made a lot easier by the circumstances that he is facing. In this case, his desire to love himself, serve his best interests and his desire to serve his father are aligned. This causes the father joy simply because he is back.

But what is going to happen when the younger son's devotion to his own wellbeing is not aligned with his devotion to his father? If he does not develop a greater love for this father than for himself, then there will come a time when he will leave again, a time when he will choose to leave his father for his own perceived best interests. This is precisely why Jesus has just taught that allegiance to Him has to be higher than any other allegiance in order to be his disciple. From the story of the sinful woman in Simon the Pharisee's house, we have reason to believe that the younger son will develop a great love for his father because he has been forgiven so much.

With God, the forgiveness and mercy are always there for us, because that is what He feels for us regardless of what we have done or not done. Yet we must choose to be in relationship with God to receive that and have it operating in our lives. It is true that the younger son's repentance is motivated by selfish concerns. This is also true of most of us when we come into relationship with God through Christ. Those selfish concerns do not disqualify us from receiving God's forgiveness and mercy, but they will end up taking us out of relationship with Him again, just as they did with the older son standing outside the party. So we need to develop a love and devotion to God that is stronger than our self-centered concerns. The best way to do this is to focus on how much we have been forgiven in Christ because those who have been forgiven much love much.

Forgiven in Christ with you,

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