

Joshua 4:19-5:12 (NIV)

¹⁹ On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. ²⁰ And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. ²¹ He said to the Israelites, “In the future when your descendants ask their parents, ‘What do these stones mean?’ ²² tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’ ²³ For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. ²⁴ He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God.”

^{5:1} Now when all the Amorite kings west of the Jordan and all the Canaanite kings along the coast heard how the Lord had dried up the Jordan before the Israelites until they had crossed over, their hearts melted in fear and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites.

² At that time the Lord said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again.” ³ So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath Haaraloth.

⁴ Now this is why he did so: All those who came out of Egypt—all the men of military age—died in the wilderness on the way after leaving Egypt. ⁵ All the people that came out had been circumcised, but all the people born in the wilderness during the journey from Egypt had not. ⁶ The Israelites had moved about in the wilderness forty years until all the men who were of military age when they left Egypt had died, since they had not obeyed the Lord. For the Lord had sworn to them that they would not see the land he had solemnly promised their ancestors to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. ⁷ So he raised up their sons in their place, and these were the ones Joshua circumcised. They were still uncircumcised because they had not been circumcised on the way. ⁸ And after the whole nation had been circumcised, they remained where they were in camp until they were healed.

⁹ Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.” So the place has been called Gilgal to this day.

¹⁰ On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. ¹¹ The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. ¹² The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan.

Luke 15:11-32 (NIV)

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

An Ebenezer for All God has Done for Us

The good news I want to proclaim this morning is that the Lord has loved us and will continue loving us out of the darkness and into His light.

This morning our gospel passage is Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son from Luke chapter 15. And this parable, about a father and his two sons, has become one of the most famous and well-known parables Jesus told. It opens with the younger son asking his father to go ahead & give him the inheritance he is in line to receive when his father dies. So, in doing so, he is basically saying to his dad, “Dad, you mean nothing to me. You may not be dead yet, but you are dead to me. And since you’re dead to me, your last will & testament kicks in and I’ll go ahead and take my share now.”

Now, putting ourselves in the father’s shoes, I would imagine the response we would’ve been inclined to have would’ve been “No, son. I’m not going to give you your inheritance now, as I’m still very much alive,” or maybe even something a little more spicy. But, surprisingly, the father obliges his son’s request. And verse 13 tells us that not long after that, the son gets together all he has, sets off for a distant country and there squanders his wealth in wild living. And so, while the word “prodigal” does not appear in the text, he has become known as the “prodigal son” because ‘prodigal’ means to be recklessly extravagant.

Well, the young man reaps what he sows, as he ends up without a penny to his name. The only job he can find is tending to pigs, but even then he remains hungry. But verse 17 says that this brings him to his senses. Realizing the error of his ways, he says, “How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!” And so, he sets about to return to his father in humility and repentance. Though, because of what he had done to his father, he doesn’t expect to be treated as his son; he deems himself unworthy of it. Yet, when he returns home, while he is still a long way off his father sees him and is filled with compassion, and he runs to his son, throws his arms around him and kisses him.”

And so, the good news of this parable is that the Lord has loved us and will continue loving us out of the darkness and into His light. This prodigal son represents all the ways we have gone astray of God’s ways, walked away from Him and spurned His love, not to mention the ways we will do that in the future. Well, with the response of the prodigal’s father, Jesus is teaching us about *His* unconditional love and grace toward us despite our sin. And we can see this truth depicted for us visually in the icon of this parable {at the link in the footnote¹}. This Lent, we’ve been talking on Wednesday nights about the tradition of icons that comes out of the Eastern Orthodox Church and that one of the Eastern Church’s primary purposes with icons is to teach Church doctrine; that is, to *visually* teach the truths about God and us that scripture reveals in words. And so, the way this icon is doing that is by depicting the prodigal son as being embraced not by his father, but by whom? Jesus. By visually replacing the father with Jesus, throughout the different scenes that the icons recounts, it is teaching us that everything the father does in this parable represents the posture Jesus has toward us in our sin.

¹ Icon link:

<https://www.goarch.org/documents/32058/2133587/prodigal-son-christ-large-wide.jpg/fd5977b2-2e08-4995-8c41-324e8df62e46?t=1516376711000>

The good news of this parable is that the Lord has loved us and will continue loving us out of the darkness and into His light. Though, it is important for us to recognize that the prodigal son is not the only representation of our sin sickness in this story. Indeed, this parable should really be called “The Parable of the Two Sons”. You see, while this older son had *refrained* from all the prodigal living that his younger brother went after, in His reaction to his brother’s return and his jealousy at the party his father throws in celebration, we can see the darkness residing in *his* heart revealed.

Verse 28 says that when he heard the party and learned of his brother’s return,

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

So, while the prodigal son provides us with a mirror to see the reality of the things we do or have done that we ought *not* to, with this older son a mirror is held up for us of things we do not do or have not done that we ought to have. Like we’ll say in the confession in a bit:

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word and deed,
by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.*

And what we have usually left undone in our sin can usually be summed up as a failure to (give and receive) love. This older son is suffering from a hardness of heart, toward his brother and father. And yet, we see that his sin hurts him more than them: as he misses out on the blessing of being able to love and celebrate with his father and brother. And so, we can see in this older son our sin is not just taking actions we know we shouldn’t, it also comes in harboring toxic attitudes like judgment and resentment, envy and so on, which will be equally large obstacles in holding us back from the joy and flourishing he intends. It will rob us of so much of the blessing that there is to be had through life in this world. However, we are usually quite powerless to change these attitudes for ourselves. But the good news is that the Lord has loved us and will continue loving us out of the darkness and into His light.

And, in addition to inviting each of us to reflect on the fruits of our sin-sickness and Jesus’ (unconditional) love for us in spite of it, this parable also sheds some light on the particular ways that Jesus goes about loving us - that He seeks to love us - out of our sin. Through the father’s posture toward each of his sons, this parable shows how the Lord loves us perfectly in ways that invite us into change.

First, we see in the Father’s response to the younger, prodigal son, how the Lord’s love for us is never controlling. Y’all have heard me say many times now that the opposite of love is not hate, the opposite of love is control. Well, if God is love, it makes sense that His posture toward us would be *uncontrolling*, even in our sin. The Lord respects our free will; He created us with it and He will not seek to override it. This means that if we want to act on our desires, no matter how distorted or misguided they may be, He may mercifully send some warnings our way or give us a check in our spirit, but ultimately He’s going to let us do *what we want* (even to our own harm).

- So, like the younger son, our desire could to indulge greed or to pursue pleasure in a manner outside of the boundaries God has revealed are good for us.
- But, more broadly, our desire could just be to be king of our own lives, rather than allowing Him to be our (lord and) king. And so, we take for granted the gift He has given us of life in this world and, like the younger son, we take that inheritance and say, “thanks God (if you even exist), but I’m gonna take things from here and live life my way according to my own limited understanding. And if we can’t already recognize the bad fruit of choosing that way, one day we will. Lord, have mercy.
 - We talked last week about how the Lord doesn't punish us for sin - and that is absolutely true - but, to be honest, He doesn't have to. Because sin has its own consequences. The nature of sin is that it has the fruit of misery built into it.

So, the first way the Lord loves us is by respecting our free will in the hopes that we will realize what living for ourselves or flouting His wisdom gets us, that it leads to the opposite of the flourishing and peace and joy we yearn for. And yet, Jesus never gives up on us and is always there waiting with open arms, when (or if) we come to our senses. There is no limit to God's love and grace and welcome to us whenever we repent, and turn away from our sin and back toward Him. With Jesus, there is always an open door to relationship with him.

So, the father's response to the younger son reveals how there is no control in the way God loves us. Rather, He lets us *do what we desire*, in hopes that we will *come to our senses*: to recognize the reality of what acting on that desire brings, so that our desire might shift toward Him, toward trusting Him.

But, then turning to the father's interaction with the older brother, it reveals something else about how God seeks to love us out of our sin. To the older son's credit, he does get really honest with his dad about how he feels, which is basically that his father has never really loved and blessed him, at least not the way he seems to be loving his brother, with a return celebration. Well, y'all know that I'm always trying to encourage us to be honest with God about whatever we desire, no matter if we feel it is good or bad. And here we can see one reason why: because when this older son gets honest with his dad, it gives his dad an opportunity for his father to speak truth to the lie his son is believing. In verse 31, the father says, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." He's calling his older son to recognize the abundance of blessings he already enjoys, perhaps even opportunities he hasn't taken advantage of. And this may include the opportunity to engage in relationship differently with his dad - and now, maybe his brother, which his dad is (implicitly) inviting him to do, as he clearly wants his son to come to the party. You know, sometimes we may feel like the Lord is distant from us, that he doesn't speak to us - and he might never speak to us audibly - but it's hard for God to be in relationship with us when we won't really get honest with him. He can only meet us in reality, not when we're acting the way we think we should or saying the things we think we should say, but right in the messy reality of our messy hearts and lives. The Lord is waiting for us to get real with him, and it is safe for us to do so; we need not be afraid of his condemnation.

The good news is that the Lord has loved us and will continue loving us out of the darkness and into His light. And we can see in this parable how Jesus not only loves us unconditionally, but He loves us in the ways that we need, that our hearts might continue to be transformed into being more like His. And so, perhaps what some of us needed to hear this morning is to be assured that in Jesus no sin can keep us from turning to the Lord and being received with unconditional love every time. Still, others of us may have needed another encouragement to come before the Lord and really start shooting him straight.

But, for others of us today might be an opportunity for us to reflect, with grateful hearts, on the transformation that the Lord has brought about and loved us into. I know for me personally, I have *so far* to go in my journey, so far: my character and wisdom remain light years away from that of Jesus - but this still does not diminish all of the miraculous ways that God has brought about changes in my heart - to correct distorted views I've had of him that bore bad fruit, to change some defects in my character that brought harm to myself and others - ways He has shined His light into some really dark places within me. And there are ways you can recognize God has done that for you?

Well, I want to mention just briefly how such recognition is woven into the passage we read from Joshua this morning. It takes place right after a significant moment in Israel's history, when they *finally* crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. After the Lord had rescued them from slavery in Egypt, they had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years -and with no shortage of hiccups and episodes of faithlessness - but now the Lord had finally gotten them there. So, recognizing the remarkable thing God had done in their lives, we see in chapter 4 verse 20 that, now that they had crossed the Jordan, their leader Joshua set up a stone monument to mark all that the Lord had done and seen them through and now brought them into. A monument like this is called an 'ebenezer', which is just a word for meaning stones of remembrance.

Well, perhaps today is an opportunity for us to build an ebenezer of our own, not with physical rocks, but in our hearts, through remembrance in our minds and praise in song to God for the wondrous things He has done in our lives already, the ways he has loved and blessed us into more grace and truth

and the ways we can be confident He will continue to do so in ways that our minds can't even comprehend, if we only continue to follow Him.

In a moment, for our response hymn, we'll sing that familiar hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" and before we sing it, let's look at it for just a moment.

1. The first verse is one of praise to the Lord as the fount - the source of every blessing we have ever received - all rooted in his redeeming love.²
2. Then, in the second verse, we'll sing "Here I raise mine Ebenezer / Hither by Thy help I'm come." That is, "I have come to this place by Your help."³
3. But finally, in verse three, we plea for his continued help, that He would continue to heal the sin-sickness of our hearts *by His grace and love*.⁴

The good news is that the Lord has loved us and will continue loving us out of the darkness and into His light.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

² 1. Come Thou fount of every blessing / Tune my heart to sing Thy grace / Streams of mercy never ceasing / Call for songs of loudest praise / Teach me some melodious sonnet / Sung by flaming tongues above / Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it / Mount of Thy redeeming love

³ 2. Here I raise mine Ebenezer / Hither by Thy help I'm come / And I hope by Thy good pleasure / Safely to arrive at home / Jesus sought me when a stranger / Wandering from the fold of God / He to rescue me from danger / Interposed His precious blood

⁴ 3. O by grace how great a debtor / Daily I'm constrained to be / Let Thy grace, Lord like a fetter / Bind my wandering heart to Thee / Prone to wander Lord I feel it / Prone to leave the God I love / Here's my heart Lord take and seal it / Seal it for Thy courts above.