

“The gift you can never repay”

Father's Day
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The Woodside Church

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I want to take you back... to a day I almost didn't survive.

September 21, 1979. It was a dark night and the rain was pouring. I was riding my moped...and I hit a parked van. I was knocked completely unconscious... lying face down in a pool of water.

All I remember was leaving the house — the next thing I knew, it was 3 days later, and I was in the hospital. Not a single memory ever came back. Not the accident. Not the ambulance. Not entering hospital. Not the surgery. Just... gone. Three days of my life, erased. I spent 10 days in the hospital, and I was in a wheelchair for the next five weeks.

I would have died... but a man heard the crash and pulled me out of the water and called an ambulance. He saved my life... My father was so grateful, relieved, and wanted to give the good Samaritan a financial reward for saving his son's life... but he refused. The man who saved me would not accept the money and responded that he... was a Christian... No reward... No payment... At the time... I thought it was just a kind gesture. But now — I see something deeper. I see grace.

A couple of years later something happened that really shook me. Karl had been my best friend since kindergarten. He moved from town I grew up near the George Washington Bridge after 8th grade to Westchester County in north New York. I did see him quite often during high school but... things changed for him. The summer after high school... Karl committed suicide.... and I was the last person to see him alive. I didn't have faith to make sense of it... I didn't have anything to hold onto. It bothered me... deeply. I didn't see it coming. I kept asking: "How did I miss that?" "Could I have done something?" I didn't have answers. This really rocked me and I didn't have faith to fall back on. I just felt... lost.

But even then... God hadn't left me. He was still there. Still pursuing. Still reaching. Even when I didn't understand.

In college... a friend tried to bring me to Christ. He invited me to his youth group and I went. He even brought me on a retreat. I was there. I was listening. I could feel that there was something to it.

But I wasn't ready. I don't know exactly why. Maybe I still had too many questions. Maybe I was too comfortable. Maybe I just wasn't at the place yet, where I could let go and trust something bigger than myself.

Looking back, I don't think that time was wasted. God was planting something. The seed was going in ... it just wasn't the right season yet.

Maybe you know that feeling. You've been close. You've sat in a room like this one. You've heard something that stirred you. But you walked away and told yourself... not yet. *That's okay. God is patient... He was patient with me for a long time.*

A couple years after college... I went on a ski trip to Killington, Vermont. And those of you who know me can attest to the fact that I am a skiing fanatic and will travel at any time of evening to get a full day in Vermont before making the trip back to PA!

It turned out to be the best ski trip ever... That's where I met my future wife, Karen. Karen told me about her faith growing up and how important it was to her. She attended church every week... and after a while, I started meeting her there. I wasn't sure what I believed. I just knew I wanted to be near her.

But something happened over time. When the pressures of life came — the hard days, the unexpected challenges — I noticed something. A peace. A stillness. Something I couldn't quite explain and hadn't felt before.

I didn't go looking for it. It found me.

That's when I knew this was real.

Looking back — God had been reaching for me the whole time... through the man who saved me... through my college friend... through Karen... And this time... I was ready. God wasn't waiting for me to get it all right. He was offering something else. That's why this passage connects so much with me

*Parable of the Lost Son. **Luke 15:11–24***

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

“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. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“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! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ 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.”

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

“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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

A son walks away... loses everything... comes home ready to be a servant. He's ready to earn it back. But the father ... doesn't let him finish. He runs... He embraces.... He restores... That's grace.

”Then one day during Adventure Club... Doug tapped me on the shoulder. Just a simple tap and ask me to go on a Mission Trip with teenagers...sleep in cabins... and have limited hot water for showers. But it changed everything. During that first trip up to the Adirondacks we had a closing service that was hours long... and I can say that was where I really felt the Holy Spirit for the first time... Mission trips are definitely my calling... and I have not missed a year since that very first trip (except for that little COVID problem in 2020).

In 2004, I started going to the Dominican Republic — and it grabbed my heart in a way I didn't expect. So much so that many years I brought my whole family with me. I wanted my kids to see it... To feel it... To understand that serving isn't something you do once in a while ... it's a way of life.

And this year... I'll be heading out on the Senior High trip to the Bahamas. In fact ... I leave Woodside tomorrow morning at 3AM.

I have learned that God works through small nudges. And when you say yes... you never know where it will lead you. We don't serve to repay God.. We serve because we can't repay Him... and God gives us back more than we always put in. One thing I've noticed ... I've been able to forgive easily. That's not an achievement. It's just a gift. Because forgiveness isn't natural for most. Holding on to a grudge is like the old saying: you drink poison and expect to affect the other person.

But Scripture says:

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ... God forgave you.

When you understand forgiveness ... you stop keeping score. You start letting go. You choose love. Because you've received... a gift you could never repay.

I haven't done this alone. And I can't stress that enough. |

It actually started with another tap on the shoulder ... this time from Aria Vakili, not long after I joined Woodside in 1999. He asked me to join the Thursday night men's group. That's how it begins, isn't it? Someone notices you. Someone reaches out. And you say yes. |

I've been part of a couple of different groups over the years. But my current group... I've been with them for more than a dozen years now. These men know me. Really know me. |

There is something powerful that happens when you sit in a room with people who are willing to be honest ... about their doubts, their struggles, their questions. You realize you're not alone in what you're carrying. |

But here's what surprised me most. It's not just the support. It's the perspective. When you read a passage of Scripture and think you understand it... and then someone across the table sees it completely differently ... and they're right too ... it changes you. It stretches you. It shows you that God's word is bigger than any one person's view of it. |

We weren't meant to do life alone. We weren't meant to figure it all out by ourselves either. Iron sharpens iron ... and I have been sharpened more times than I can count sitting in that room. |

If you're not in a group... I want to encourage you to find one. Not because it's the right thing to do. But because you will get back far more than you put in. |

Today... I'm incredibly grateful. I'm the father of five children and have 1 granddaughter and a son law — David, Kathleen and her husband Don, Ryan and his wife to be Maya, Jack and his wife Erin, and Peter. |

And just two months ago... something happened that stopped me in my tracks. |

My daughter Kathleen had a baby girl. Samantha Mae Garner. Born April 22nd. |

When I held her... I thought about a rainy night in 1979. A young man face down in a pool of water. A life that almost didn't make it. |

And now... Samantha.

When I look at my family ... I see everything God has done. From a life almost lost... to a life filled with blessing. I didn't earn this. I can't repay it. That's grace. A gift you could never repay... but it's a gift you can share. Share it with someone. That's what others did for me. |

When I look back ... 1979... loss... questions... people reaching out... finding Christ... I see one thing: |

God's love was always there. |

And maybe today... God is tapping you. The question is ... will you respond? |

Please pray with me. |

Heavenly Father,
Thank You for Your love ... a love we could never earn or repay.
Help us to love deeply, forgive freely, and follow You faithfully.
If You're calling us today ... give us the courage to say yes.
Amen.