

- Keith Hernandez was one of baseball's top players when he played. His career batting average is around .300. He won a record 11 consecutive Golden Glove awards for excellence in fielding. He's won a batting championship for having the highest average, the Most Valuable Player award in his league, and even a couple of World Series.
- Yet with all his accomplishments, he has missed out on something crucially important to him -- his father's acceptance and recognition that what he has accomplished is valuable. Listen to what he had to say in a very candid interview about his relationship with his father: One day Keith asked his father, "Dad, I have a lifetime .300 batting average. What more do you want?" His father replied, "But someday you're going to look back and say, 'I could have done more.'"
- If you've ever had an experience like this you know how this shapes how you live and how you see God. Where you have to work harder, do more, always striving to gain his approval.
- There's a Spanish story of a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father." On Saturday 800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.
- If you've ever been the person who ran away from their Father, who lost a lot in your relationship with him and desperately wanted it back but never got it, it impacts your view of God. As someone who will never forgive, never fully accept you back.
- For those that were not here last week, we are spending three weeks in the story of the prodigal son.
- The obvious application of the story is the son who left home but returned and was brought back into the fold by the father.
- The more I read this story though, I realize that this story is not about the younger son. It is not about the older son.

11 *Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons.*

- This is a story about the father. He is the focus of the story. Jesus told the parable because both the sinners and the Pharisees had a wrong view of God the Father.
- They both saw God as someone who punished sin, who expected holiness, and who was not terribly lenient with those who messed up and had high expectations for particular behavior. If you met them, you were approved. If not, you were in trouble.
- For the sinners, this meant they felt alienated, abandoned and far from God. There was no incentive to pursue him. They had blown it and there was no way back. Life and God was against them.
- For the Pharisees, this meant they were proud of their record of obedience. It meant they worked harder and harder trying to make sure God approved of their actions, and they looked down on those who did not do as they did. God surely did not approve of these others as much as themselves.
- As Jesus listened to and interacted with these groups, he realized that their whole conception of God was messed up.
- I wonder if that is you? I wonder how many of us fall into one of these two camps? I know it has been true of me.
- We think our view of God is just fine, but when a crisis or problem hits, it reveals what we really think of him and what we believe he thinks about us.
- When you consider God, what is he like? We often picture Jesus as a meek, loveable, non-intimidating kind of guy. He's the one I go to when I have an issue with God.

- God the Father is often thought of as stern, unyielding, more interested in my character than anything else, not all that fun. (Of course, then there is the Spirit and we often don't know what to do with Him.)
- Change your focus as I read the story again. Consider that the father is the focal point of the entire story. What do you see? What is he like? Why does he do what he does? What do you notice about him?

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.' "

- The father is the hero of the story. He is the one who responds to two different sons in love. He is the one who acts in a way that is opposite of what most of us would do or have experienced.
- Jesus wanted his listeners (and us) to know that **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.** There is lots in this story, but I see three things about the Father, that if we give ourselves fully to living as if they are true, have the potential to change our entire perspective on being a follower of Jesus.

I. The Father loves you without conditions.

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.

- We already looked at this request from the younger son's perspective. It was an insult, a slap in the face, a selfish request.

- Picture the way the father felt. It is as if all he had been trying to teach, coach and parent into his son was being rejected. His son was walking away from the family, the family values, everything.
- That is a devastating and crushing feeling. He is being rejected, abandoned and essentially told his son did not value him at all. His son wanted him dead and gone.
- And in the middle of all this, his son is demanding money to go live and do what he knows will be a failure. He knows it's a bad choice.
- His father then responds by giving his son exactly what he asks for. Crazy, right?
- He could have said no. He could have punished him. He could have cut him out of the will. He could have let his son go without any resources.
- He does not chase him down by going to the distant land. He does not curtail his choices. He does not send along a bodyguard, a chaperone.
- Why is this so significant?
- The Father gives freedom without forcing. He let his son make his choices.
- The father offers his son the freedom to reject his love or love him in return for his love.
- There is something about the Father allowing freedom for me.
- He allows us to choose. We cannot even comprehend the depths of this love because it is precisely his immense love that causes him immense suffering.
- He knew the pain that would come from the younger sons's choices but his love made him powerless to prevent it.
- He wanted his elder son to enjoy his presence and experience his affection, but gave the freedom to his son to live in anger and suspicion.
- And when his son returns, he accepts him without conditions, without reservations.
- The Father has been hurt. He is pained by his son's rejection. Yet he stands on the porch every day. Looking for his son. Waiting for any sign that he might be returning. He harbors no bitterness, no anger, no frustration. He is not waiting to punish or scold.
- His son has walked away from him and it is killing him. Yet he lives in that pain, not blocking it, always waiting, always hoping, never despairing, that his children will return so he can speak words of life and blessing to them.
- His love is generous and unlimited.
- **Do I believe that there is a real desire in God to simply be with me?**
- **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME** as his love for me is unconditional.

II. The Father wants to lavish attention and blessing on you.

- How would you respond if your child took a third of your net worth, squandered it on dumb decisions that knew were bad decisions, and then comes back home?
 - Prove yourself. Not going to entrust much to you. Set borders and boundaries.
- 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.'*
- The son's pleas are completely irrelevant. The father is simply too happy.
 - The Father cannot wait to give his son new life.
 - He did not just give his son any robe . . . he gave him the best robe.
 - Both the ring and sandals are marks of his identity as his son – slaves went barefoot, or really poor people.
 - He throws a party and calls for a feast. He is not content to feel joyful, he wants to share it with all the people around him. Doesn't really matter what they think.

- This is a father who exuberantly, passionately wants to lavish his love on his son. He is so excited he wants to celebrate, talk about, eat, dance, live it up.
- This attitude is not restricted to the younger son. When he goes to plead with his elder son to come join the party, he tells 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.’*”
- This is all yours. I hold nothing back from you. Take advantage of your identity as my son to enjoy it. To celebrate. I love having you here.
- Not because of what you can do for me, but because you are my son and I love you ridiculously.
- He wanted the elder son to celebrate, not because of what he had accomplished but because they were family.
- I love the language. “We HAD to celebrate.” My love and joy knows no bounds. It is not restrained. I cannot contain it. This is going to come out of me no matter what.
- It is hard for us to grasp that this kind of passionate generosity and exuberance is being directed at me!
- Surely God has favorites.
- Our God, who exhibits the fullness of the attributes of both Father and Mother to us, does not compare. Never. Even though I know in my head that this is true, it is still very hard to fully accept it with my whole being.
- As long as I keep looking at God as a landowner, as a father who wants to get the most out of me for the least cost, I cannot but become jealous, bitter, and resentful toward my fellow workers or my brothers and sisters. BUT if I am able to look at the world with the eyes of God’s love and discover that God’s vision is not that of a stereotypical landowner or patriarch but rather than of an all-giving and forgiving father who does not measure out his love to his children according to how well they behave, then I quickly see that my only true response can be deep gratitude.
- *“For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life – pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures – and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair.”* (The Return of the Prodigal, Henri Nowen, p106)
- **Can I live like God’s approval cannot be lost or earned?**
- Many people live their lives never fully sure that they are loved as they are. Yet there is a father who is moving towards them, who loves them without borders and wants to lavish this love onto them in ridiculously extravagantly ways.

III. The Father considers you worth pursuing relentlessly.

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.

- His father saw him “while he was a long way off.” That means he was looking for him.
- But it is so much more than that. He was filled with compassion (the word means he felt it viscerally, deep down in his bowels).
- In that moment he did see the waywardness or disobedience. He was not consumed with his past actions. He was not put off by his horrible appearance or bad choices.
- He did not wait for his son to come to him, standing sternly with arms folded.

- He ran to him. With wild abandon. Arms outstretched. Crying and weeping he hugged and kissed him. (The word means to keep on kissing him.) There was not holding back.
- He didn't wait to know why his son was back, what conditions were being put on it. He simply ran to him.
- This kind of expression only happens when a person is joyful and completely absorbed in the person coming towards them. The same could be said with regards to the elder brother.

28 *"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him."*

- The father went out and pleaded with his elder son. The verb tense is again the same with the meaning being that he *kept on* pleading with him. It was not a one time thing.
- God is not a Father who stays home, doesn't move, and expects his children to come to him, apologize for their aberrant behavior, beg for forgiveness and promise to do better.
- Instead, he leaves the house, he pleads, he ignores his own dignity, pays no attention to apologies and promises of change and brings them into the party he has for them.
- The father is not hiding from me. In reality, he is looking for me while I am doing the hiding.
- God wants to find me as much as if not more than, I want to find God.
- Not: "How am I to find God?" but "How am I to let myself be found by him?"
- Not "How I am to know God?" ... but "How am I to let myself be known by God?"
- Not "How am I to love God?" but "How am I to let myself be loved by God?"
- **Can I accept that I am worth looking for?**

• **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.**

- He loves you without conditions or borders. The kind of love that the only way to handle is to accept it. To bask in it. To feel it. To let him love you that way. To not block it.
- He wants to lavish his attention on you. To wrap you up in who he is. To encourage you. To put his arm around you. To bless you. To tell you how proud he is of you.
- He will never give up. He wants you more than you can ever want him. He looks at you and sees someone worth so much he simply cannot give up on you. It's not in him.
- The parable of the prodigal son is a story that speaks about a love that existed before any rejection was possible and that will still be there after all rejections have taken place.
- The Father loves me without conditions or borders (acceptance)
- Do I believe that there is a real desire in God to simply be with me?
- The Father wants to lavish attention and blessing on me (significance).
- Can I live like God's approval cannot be lost or earned?
- The Father considers you worth pursuing relentlessly (security).
- Can I accept that I am worth looking for?

• **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.**

- We move towards him through Jesus. The Jesus who came to earth to live and ultimately die for me so that I can be found and connect with a father who desperately loves me.
- His death becomes an invitation. An invitation to intimacy with him. An invitation to experience his love. An invitation to live and act freely as his children.
- Our heavenly father loved us so much that he went far beyond all logic to send his son to die.
- Jesus' death and resurrection is an expression of the extravagance of the Father's love, which sent him to express his love and blessing on us when we had rejected the family and left home.
- The Father thought we were so valuable, he pursued you relentlessly, up to and including giving up the life of his only son.
- Celebration belongs to God's kingdom.

- Some day I will stand in front of my Father and he is going to look at me and tell me well done and welcome me home with the same enthusiasm that Father did in this story.
- I can hardly wait. But until then, he is loving me, pursuing me with everything he has, and wanting to lavish me with all of his attention.
- **THE FATHER IS ALWAYS MOVING TOWARDS ME.**
- In return for that love, let's move towards him.