

## **“The Path: Don’t Look Back”**

31 March 2019: 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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**“You know what's interesting about Washington?**

**It's the kind of place where second-guessing has become second nature”**

**(—George W. Bush, 17 May 2002 Speech).**

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Hear the day’s lesson:

**1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 So he told them this parable: . . .**

**11b"There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"**

**20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.**

**25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me**

**even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes; you killed the fatted calf for him!**

**31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found' " (Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32).**

We have heard this parable preached many times and from many angles. I once heard a clever woman preach it from the absent mother's perspective. She ventured all the characters would have meshed if they heeded a woman's voice—perhaps true. I have, still, never heard this story preached from the point of view of fatted calf.

In any case, we each know how the parable begins and ends. It is as predictable as soggy cornflakes. Some folks ask: "Why plow old ground?" The reason to "plow again" is this parable has a slice of all our stories. First, a wayward son who wants to find life. Second, another son who always—and I mean always—plays by the rules, does what people tell/ask him to do, and never strays from instilled parental values. Third, this parable has a parental quandary: "How can I be fair to each of my sons without creating envy?" The father acts on his convictions, but risks alienating his sons at every turn. Rather than exploring how unlike these sons are, I suggest we ponder on something they hold in common.

No matter how dissimilar these sons are, each has a knack for "second guessing" their father. Let's call this the curse of the "second guess." Having someone second guess us means regardless of what we do, there are always those who will criticize/belittle our efforts. These "second guessers" ridicule our intellect, weaken our authority, and impugn our motives. In short, whatever we do, someone will take issue with it and find fault. These two sons second guess as they assume the father's subsequent actions. An Aesop Fable tidily illustrates this staple of second-guessing.

**A Man and his son were once going with their Donkey to market. As they were walking along by its side a countryman passed them and said: "You fools, what is a Donkey for but to ride upon?" So, the Man put the Boy on the Donkey and they went on their way. But soon they passed a group of men, one of whom said: "See that lazy youngster, he lets his father walk while he rides."**

**So, the Man ordered his Boy to get off, and got on himself. But they hadn't gone far when they passed two women, one of whom said to the other: "Shame on that lazy lout to let his poor little son trudge along." Well, the Man didn't know what to do, but at last he took his Boy up before him on the Donkey. By this time, they had come to the town, and the passers-by began to jeer and point at them. The Man stopped and asked what they were scoffing at. The men said: "Aren't you ashamed of yourself for overloading that poor donkey of yourself and your hulking son?"**

**The Man and Boy got off and tried to think what to do. They thought and they thought, till at last they cut down a pole, tied the donkey's feet to it, and raised the pole and the donkey to their shoulders. They went along amid the laughter of all who met them till they came to Market Bridge, when the Donkey, getting one of his feet loose, kicked out and caused the Boy to drop his end of the pole. In the struggle the Donkey fell over the bridge, and because The Man and Boy**

**tyed the Donkey's feet, he drowned. "That will teach you," said an old man who had followed them. Aesop's moral is this: "Please all, and you will please none."**

People second-guess others constantly. It happens all the time. Notice what happens when the parable's younger son returns. He rehearses a speech over and over again trudging the long road home. He says to himself, *"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands"* (Luke 15:18-19). The younger son assumes what the father thinks and feels—and how his father will react. So, the Prodigal gets his speech in order and rehearses it persistently as he returns home.

The elder son also second-guesses the father, knowing how the father ought to treat him, too. He voices indignity by asserting in a sizzling tone, *"Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him"* (Luke 15:29-30)!

Both sons assume they know how their father would/should react. Neither is prepared for how the father actually reacts. The younger assumes his father will welcome him back, if and only if, the younger makes amends. Similarly, the elder blurts out: *"You have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends."* The elder brother perceives that others always slight him. Strangely, he likely had few friends with whom to celebrate anyway.

In Jesus' parable each son misjudges the father. Whether or not they like it, they hold this common flaw simultaneously. The younger thinks his father will be severe, but the father is not—he is gracious to a fault. The elder brother accuses the father of not caring enough for him, and yet the father points out rightly: *"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."* What more could a parent offer a child?

Do you ever think about your relationship to God? Do you remember the situation out of which Jesus begins this parable? Luke writes, *"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them'"* (Luke 15:1-2). These religious authorities saw Jesus' graciousness and hospitality toward those whom they considered sinners—and they grumbled.

When you think of your eternal destiny, do you think God has prepared an advanced ticket for you? Where are you headed—heaven/hell? Do you ever second-guess God about your eternal deliverance? If you are certain about whether God is giving you "thumbs up" or thumbs down," then consider this notion. If, like these two sons, you second guess God, then know that you may guess wrong.

Most of Jesus' parables address the Kingdom of God. In God's Kingdom we are never certain for whom or in what situation God's awesome power of grace and mercy may strike. Don't you dislike not being in control? Amen.

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