

I Can't Believe the Love I've Found

From the sermon series: God's Prodigal Love

Text: Luke 15: 20-24

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Spring Lake, Michigan

August 17, 1986

Transcription of the spoken sermon

...while he was still a long way off his father saw him, and his heart went out to him. He ran to meet him, flung his arms round him, and kissed him....The father said to his servants, "Quick! Fetch a robe, my best one, ...a ring...and shoes....Bring the fatted calf. ...let us have a feast to celebrate the day...and the festivities began. Luke 15: 20-24

The next time I select this parable as the basis of the message, I will entitle it, "When Heaven Throws a Party." That says it well, better perhaps than our title today. But the title of this message is consistent with the perspective from which we have walked through the story; we've been looking at it primarily through the eyes of the younger son. An Old Scottish preacher treated it that way, too, but in one message he divided the story into three movements, "Sick of home, homesick, and home." That says it well, too. We've stayed with the story for four weeks and I think we, too, have gotten the feel of the movement:

I want to do it on my own!
Is that all there is?
I wish I could start over!

Now, finally, I can't believe the love I've found! I like that statement. It expresses the amazed joy of discovery the younger son experienced at his reception by the father and it points, as well, to the heart of the story, what the story is really all about – the love of the father, which is a parable of the love of God.

We have rehearsed the story often enough; it is the most familiar parable Jesus told. But the climactic scene never fails to move us.

But while he was still a long way off his father saw him, and his heart went out to him. He ran to meet him, flung his arms around him, and kissed him.

What a vivid picture of love, forgiveness, reconciliation. What deep emotion is thus expressed and what deep chords the scene touches in our own hearts.

Let us stick with the text for a moment.

The son managed to get the first part of his rehearsed speech out:

Father, I have sinned, against God and against you; I am no longer fit to be called your son.

No more could be spoken; no more need be spoken. Love took over; love simply overwhelmed the penitent. There would be no more discussion, only rapid-fire instructions by which the son would be restored fully to the position of son and heir and the party would be prepared. The father's rationale was simple:

The dead one was alive; the lost one was found.

Let the party begin!

There you have Jesus' understanding of the nature of God's love and the way love acts. He was defending his own action, his openness to all kinds of persons – winners and losers, rich and poor, prestigious and peasant. He claimed to be in his behavior, spirit and attitude a mirror of the heart of God. The portrait of the father running down the road, embracing and kissing the son and restoring him fully is simply a picture of God waiting, watching and finally welcoming His children home.

Let us reflect on the nature of God's love as it comes to expression in Jesus' story. It is obviously the love of God and quite foreign to all human conception or expression. I am reminded of a statement from the Old Testament prophet Hosea. He is preeminently the prophet of divine love in the Old Testament. The passage is not strange to us; we have focused on it often; but the nature of the love is strange to us precisely because, as God says in the prophet's words, "I am God and not man." Hosea's prophecy opens with a personal narrative of his love for a woman who proves unfaithful, a woman whom God calls him to forgive and embrace again. That personal experience was Hosea's parable of God's love for Israel. In the 11th chapter, Hosea records how God created and cared for Israel – tenderly, lovingly, only to be rejected by her. He then speaks of judgment to fall on them for their rebellion and revolt. But then the mood changes. God says,

How can I give you up Ephraim, how surrender you...? My heart is changed within me...I will not let loose my fury, I will not turn round and destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man. Hosea 11: 8, 9

I am always struck by that statement. So often we explain our behavior, our responses, our relationships with a shrug of the shoulders – "Well, I'm only

human." And it is true, only human - and so, I lose patience, my love has limits. You can push me over the line; my love comes to an end.

I think there are some rights I do not have to give up. I take offense at some point of provocation and feel justified in doing so. In the family I set limits, I demand respect. I will not tolerate some things. I think the children need it and they do, but it is also true that I refuse to be used, abused. It makes me wonder if one could raise a family on the kind of love God displays.

I know it won't work in the world of practical affairs, in business and government. Certainly not in international affairs. That kind of love ends up crucified. It is not practical.

What are we saying about God?

What are we saying about ourselves?

Let's not try to qualify God's love as Jesus portrayed it. Let's not try to make it something else by all sorts of conditional clauses. Just think about it as Jesus portrayed it.

It is like Hosea expressed,

My love is what it is because I'm God and not man.

What will we say? Too good for this world? Too impractical? Too idealistic? Some love, though! Some love.

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, said, "Great men never run in public." Research into the ways of Palestinian community life confirms that no father would pull up his garment and run down the road. It was a disgrace. God's love, Jesus says, loses proper decorum, loses dignity, has no self-regard – just races to embrace a child coming home. Some love!

What are we saying? Are we wiser than God? Do we know better how to run the world? Is love really soft, ineffective?

Let me suggest that love is really the only truly transforming power.

Love changes us from the inside. Only an inside change is transforming.

Fear can hold us in line. Behavior patterns can be changed by threat. A heavy smoker has a coronary, and the doctor says, "No more," and the habit is broken.

Law can hold us in line. I really resist the seat belt law. It is foolish of me, but I resist being told I have to buckle up. One day this week I reached over and buckled up as I was approaching Bobbins Road on U.S. 31. At the light I stopped

and next to me the Sheriff's car stopped. Nancy said, "I wondered why you buckled up."

But behavioral response to fear or law or threat of any kind - while it may control my behavior and keep me in line - which may be for my good and for the good of society - does not have the power to transform me so that I become a new person - my new behavior being the outward sign of my new being.

Love is powerful. Love is transforming.

Maybe our trouble is that we just do not trust love to do its work. We grow anxious; we want to exercise control; we want to secure the proper outcome. We are often well-intentioned. We really do want the best for our children, our nation, our world. But we don't trust love to effect it; we feel constrained to force the best solution in any situation. So we make demands and we threaten penalty.

God loves.

Jesus came into the midst of human history and he loved, and people felt its power and all kinds of people came to him. He made no distinctions; he simply loved people. And they were changed. Transformed. And Jesus was simply God's love in flesh and in action.

Unconditional love - that is the love of God. Love that can be spurned, love that can be abused, taken advantage of, love that will not coerce, but that alone can transform.

The Father did not play it cool; he did not remain aloof; he did not keep the boy hanging, put him on probation, lecture him on responsibility or vent the anger of his wounded pride. He just hugged him and kissed him and said, "My boy is alive; he's home again!"

The son had gained insight. He had faced himself, come to his senses, acknowledged his foolishness and attained a proper humility. He was prepared to make a reasonable request of his father. He had come a long way, but he was still a stranger to grace until he felt the arms of his father, the hot, salty tears of the father falling on his shoulder.

It was the love of the father that turned him inside out. It was the love that transformed him. How could he take it in? As he thought about it, he must have said,

"I can't believe the love I've found."

Maybe we are not wiser than God; maybe God is wiser. Maybe He knows that threat and condemnation do not transform even though they may coerce one to

conform. Maybe He trusts the power of love and so He deals with us with the patience of love.

I wonder why we have missed that point in the Church. Sometime, taste some radio sermons or TV evangelists. Reflect on your experience in church over the years. Read sermon titles or the church page in the newspaper – it sounds like a horror story rather than a love story. What is the overwhelming impression created? Why do we use the phrase, "Don't preach to me!"?

What is preaching in common usage? Is it not full of oughtness - full of threat, full of warning, and laced with condemnation? Why do we adopt a method that turns away when we have the message of an unbelievable love to share?

Is it because we are insecure about the truth we bring? Do we want to force everyone into our mold? Are we unsure of love's transforming power? Do we rush in to force while God patiently waits?

God loves. God waits. And then God races to embrace the one who finally comes to his senses.

That is why the story ends with a marvelous party. The fatted calf. Music and dancing. Celebration. *That is what worship ought to be – a great party.*

Once again, how we have mutilated the whole matter.

There is a discipline of worship. I heartily commend it. Unless you arise on Sunday morning knowing it is the Lord's Day and you will worship without even stopping to make a decision, you will probably not worship with a disciplined regularity.

But, why? Do we do God a favor? Do we honor God? Well ... perhaps. But what is this coming together? Is it not a party, a celebration for a grace amazing and a love beyond compare?

I know there are spiritual disciplines, which I really need to keep in tune, in touch. But I do not do them for God's sake, to win His approval or curry His favor. I do them to keep in view this amazing love, the inspiring, uplifting experience of a love that keeps on throwing arms around me, believing in me when I give up on myself; a love that will never let me go.

So I keep coming here to hear it again. I come here to say, "Thanks be to Thee, O God!"

I really need to keep coming back; I forget so soon. I get down on myself. I see the ambiguity of my life, the equivocation of my commitment. I would give up on me; wouldn't God, Who knows the twists and warps of my soul better than I do?

The answer is simply, "No," He will never give up on me.

Remember again this story is about God's love, His attitude toward His children. We've missed the point and ruined the story by making a big deal about the far country and loose living, but that is to distort the story and turn it into a moralism. *It is not about how one lives, but about how God loves.*

If there is one great underlying, foundational, fundamental truth woven through the one story of the Bible, it comes to beautiful expression in this parable Jesus told and it is simply this - *God loves us with an everlasting love.*

Personalize that; put your own name in the sentence: God loves....

Now, to make that felt, we should really take a moment and put our arms around each other.

When you need space, go ahead - run, run like mad for as long as you need to run. Get it out of your system - that feverish cry, "I want to do it on my own!"

One day you may wake up with a real headache and a heartache, as well, and ask, "Is that all there is?"

When you get hold of yourself and feel that yearning inside and find yourself saying, "I wish I could start over," then remember this story Jesus told and simply come home - You won't believe the love you'll find.

In the meantime, God waits, God searches for the slightest sign of homesickness, God loves and longs to have you feel it, in His embrace. Open yourself to the love and to God.

Come to the party!