

Love That Puts You Out of Control

The Nature of the Love of God

Micah 7:19; Luke 15:20

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The religious people were grumbling at the life and the action of Jesus. They were grumbling because his attitude and his behavior were breaking down the lines that they had drawn that indicated who was "in" and who was "out." His behavior and his attitude embracing all, as the text says, receiving tax collectors and sinners, was distressing to the religious establishment, because they had set up a purity code so that everyone was clear on the rules. Those who were "in" knew they were "in" and those who were "out" knew that they were "out." Those who were "in," even if perhaps with some protestation of great humility, nonetheless were effected with an almost inevitable self-righteous satisfaction, while those who were "out" also received that message and considered themselves "out," unworthy. In the arrangement of that day in which the lines were clear, Jesus' manner of receiving all sorts and conditions of humankind was terribly confusing, and those who were in authority were afraid that there might be those who were "out" who might attempt to come in. And so, in response to this criticism, Jesus told three stories, and in telling these three stories, he was seeking to create a window through which could be seen the amazing love of God.

These three stories have as their central thrust the nature of the love of God. Now, as I have said often enough, we have failed to focus on the central thrust of this parable as is indicated by the very name by which it is known - The Parable of The Prodigal Son. It's not a parable about a prodigal son. It is a parable about *the love of God*. It is a parable in which Jesus portrays a love divine, a love that stands in sharp contrast to all human loves, a love that dumbfounds us and confounds us because it is so strikingly in contrast to the love that we manifest in family and in larger community. It is a love that causes us to catch our breath and wonder if it can be true, and if indeed it is true, a love that certainly makes our human society impossible.

Jesus, in this parable, was responding to his critics in order to justify his behavior on the basis of his understanding of God, of the love of God, which, if I understand the story correctly, was his understanding of the nature of reality - that at the very heart of things, deep down at the core of things, there is a love

such that it continues to cause us to stand in amazement. It is a love, I would suggest, that puts us out of control. In saying that, what I mean is that it is a love that causes us to loose our grip on the reins. It is a love that finally dissolves that frantic grip on the reins of our life, because if there is anything that threatens us as human beings, it is to be out of control. I don't care if you are wild and wicked like the young one, or stiff and righteous like the older son, there is a commonality that binds them together and, indeed, I believe, is a thread woven through the fabric of the lives of all of us, and that is a desire to be in control. "Don't surprise me."

Now, we have not only misnamed that parable, thereby missing the central focus of Jesus' story, the love of the Father, but we have also, in its preaching, focused where Jesus' focus was not. We have focused on that younger son and we have (I'm talking about we preachers. I have been guilty of it in the past and I have heard it preached this way often enough.), we have taken this marvelous story of Jesus about the love of God, and made it a story about this younger son who went off into the far country. Then we made some moralistic applications appealing to youth not to kick over the traces, not to leave home, showing the dangers thereof and the decadence that's at the end of that road. But, then, we come in with our evangelistic appeal saying that the conversion point of the young son is when he came to his senses. Have you ever heard it preached this way? He was in the far country, he came to a deep misery, but thank God he came to himself, he came to his senses.

Well, I want to suggest to you that's not a critical point at all, for that young rascal was just as much in control in the far country, in the pigpen as he had been any moment of his life. That young boy woke up to the fact that, while things were boring back home, at least there was a bunkhouse with a bunk and three squares a day, and he analyzed this situation in an ongoing, calculating human fashion and said to himself, "You know, it may be boring there, but I'm very hungry here." And so, simply adding up the pros and cons, coming to take account of things, what does he do? He just sits down and says, "You know, I think it's better at home." So, he goes home. He writes himself a speech, he memorizes it, he rehearses it, and all the time he's still in control, still writing the script, throwing in a little regret and remorse for effect. But, as a matter of fact, in coming to himself, that's precisely what he came to - he came to himself and his ongoing desire to survive and to make it with the reins still well intact *in his own hands*. The young rascal was still in charge.

And it was true of the elder brother, as well. He may have been seething with anger throughout all of the years of his responsible, faithful, diligent service to the father. He may have done it all without joy. He may have grumbled and been resentful underneath, but there's one thing about it - it was safe. He was in control. He was his own person, miserable person that he was. I think that's so characteristic of all of us, isn't it? Isn't maybe our greatest fear that we'll spin off into free fall, that we'll lose control, that we'll lose our grip? Wouldn't we be

willing to do almost anything, go almost anywhere, bear almost any burden if at least we could say we are in control? Isn't there something deep in the human person that longs for that kind of autonomy? And again, it doesn't matter where on the spectrum of human personality you fall. I find it in all of us. "Don't surprise me. Let me write the script." Some risk a bit and pay the price. Some play it safe and never play at all. But, depending on the personality type, the commonality is *the desire to be in control*.

I'm suggesting that Jesus confronts us with the love of God that is the only thing that can finally dissolve that tight rein with which we hold our lives in tow. It is *love* that puts us out of control, and it is *love* that brings us into an arena of vulnerability where we can relax and rest in the abyss of divine love.

Love is the only transforming agent in the world. Threat can keep us in line for a bit. Fear can keep us somewhere down the straight and narrow. There are control mechanisms by which we control one another, our families. The Church has been heavily into control, thereby justifying everything that Freud has ever said about the anger over against the father, the father complex, because the Church has played the role of the stern parent.

Control. That's the name of the game. We try to control and we try to stay in control.

That word is so common that I wondered where it came from, so I took my big, fat dictionary and looked it up. It comes from the French language, made up of two French words, neither of which I can pronounce. But, it means against the role. And then I was reminded that when I travel through Europe, Germany for example, go across the border or go into a bank or something, one sees this word, Kontrol. And what that means is that you are checked against the role. Guard the borders. Make sure nobody slips through. Check against the role. And we spend so much of our time making sure we measure up against the role that there will be no surprises for us, either. Control, that my life is checked off on the list.

Jesus gives us a picture of the love of God that absolutely decimates control, dissolves that frantic effort to hold on that tight grip, allowing us for the first time in our lives, once we taste it, to let go and to rest in the love of God. That's what his critics didn't understand. They had made it very clear who was "in" and who was "out," and those who were "out," as I said, considered themselves "out" and had given up on themselves. And those who were "in" considered themselves "in," never understanding the fact that they could be totally alienated within, *homeless at home*. Jesus was painting the picture of the love of God, which dissolves those distinctions and transforms.

The young rascal came to himself, to his senses in the far country. But, that was not the point of his conversion. It was the beginning of his movement toward home, but *he wasn't transformed until he allowed himself to be embraced by the father*, whose arms had never been anything but outstretched.

Threat can control us. Fear can control us. Reason, less successfully, can control us; *but love alone can transform us*. That's the love of God, and that is the deepest reality of the cosmos, and that's what Jesus was trying to say as he explained his action of welcoming all comers.

It's a powerful story, isn't it? Vivid story. The only drawback is that it's so powerful and so vivid that we begin to think about God as the Divine Parent and we forget that this is a parable and that the father figure is a symbol. God is person but God is more than person. The father symbol must be seen through to the larger reality. Jesus is not talking just about God as a Super-Parent; he's not talking about God as one more person, be that person bigger than life. He is not pointing to God as the CEO of the Universe. Jesus uses the symbol of the person of the father in order that we may see through that symbol to the vast background of reality, to that ground of all being. Jesus is trying to say, "Look! This is the way things really are at the core." What Jesus was trying to convey is the fact that in this brief life that we live, our three-score years and ten, or four-score years, or less or more, in this brief human experience of ours, what we are struggling to learn is what is true all the time - that we have come from love and that we move toward love and that we are, in the meantime, embraced by love. We have come from God and we will move to God and it is to God that we belong.

I think what Jesus was trying to say was that what the younger son was seeking "out there" and the elder son missed at home was true for both of them all the time. It was demonstrated in the non-accusing, non-condemning, non-questioning, warm embrace of the father of the younger. It was expressed by the father to the elder in the words, "My child, you are always with me. All I have is yours." Jesus was saying to the religious leaders of his day, the guardians of institutional religion, "My manner of life, what I am seeking to embody, is a picture of the nature of reality, of the heart of God. And it is true for all, all the time, always, for we have been created by love and we will move into the abyss of love, and, in the meantime, *we are loved*, because that's the deepest truth, and it's the only truth that can do for us the only thing that God really wants to do for us and that is to transform us into those who catch a glimpse of being loved and love in return.

I mentioned last week Henri Nouwen's marvelous meditation on Rembrandt's painting of "The Return of the Prodigal," and how he had, at a point of his life feeling so burned out, longing for home and yearning for the embrace of the father, identified with the younger son, until a friend said to him, "Henri, you are really the elder brother," and he had to say, "I am the elder brother, having done it all right, all my life, and being a little resentful of it." And then sometime later another friend said to him, as he was speaking about that painting that had become such a part of his life, "All your life you've been one of the sons, whether the younger or the elder. Don't you think it's time you moved into the role of the father? All of your life you've been seeking recognition and friends and accomplishments and proper performance - all of your life, Henri, all of your life

you have been on a quest. Isn't it time that you simply accept the fact that you are deeply loved in order that you may ask no quarter, but simply love in kind?"

We never love supremely, obviously; always partially, often half-heartedly. But, isn't that really what God is about with us? If ever we could sense that the deep underground is nothing but love, and from that we have arisen, and to that we will return, and in that we can rest in the present. Ah! If we could taste it, I do believe we could share it. And if we could taste it, we would be home, we could *create* home. So, the deepest word of the Gospel is, "My children, come home."