

## When God Ran

**Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 15:11-32**

Good Morning Friends. It is good to be together today, and it's good to know that there are people joining us on the livestream too. Welcome.

Our text for this morning is far and away my favorite parable that Jesus ever told. Most of us know the story as "The Prodigal Son." A wayward young adult son approaches his Father, who is very much alive and asks him for his inheritance money now. The father consents, though I imagine with some significant reservation, and the son heads out the door, the money burning a hole in his pocket. I'm sure many in the community raised their eyebrows or whispered about the son, and even more so about the Father "What kind of son asks for their inheritance!? What kind of Father just gives it away? I would certainly never do such a thing," they say at the market. Shameful, the whole thing. Even more so as news about the son's escapades trickled back to through the gossip chain. He's throwing lavish parties. Spending the money wildly. The news is scandalous. Eventually, the news stops. No one hears anymore about the Son's escapades, everyone, most especially the father fears the worst. No news is not good news. the scandalization turns into paternalism, "Well, that's what happens to someone who lives that way." "He should have known better." "That poor family." "He never should have let that boy go off with all that money."

In fact, the son is not dead. He's alive, but not well. Once the money ran out, so did his options, so did the friends he thought he'd had. He disappears in shame. Desperate and starving, he takes a job caring for a man's pigs. Not exactly a position of prestige. As he son is tending these pigs, he catches himself thinking that the scraps the pigs are eating looks pretty edible, even

delicious. It's then that the son has an epiphany, he can go home, throw himself at the mercy of his father and live life as a servant in his father's household. Ashamed as he is, anything would be better than current life. So, he heads home. And as he's coming up the lane, looking much the worse for wear, his father sees him. The father throws open the door and runs, full tilt, to meet his son. He catches him in his arms, hugs him, kisses him and weeps, because the son he thought he had lost has been found, the son that he feared dead is in his arms. In his beautiful, blubbery joy, he announces to his servants, "Prepare a feast! Serve the fatted calf! Invite everyone, because my son is home and I want to celebrate!"

The party is already under way when the older brother, returning from a day out, (perhaps working, or tending to some other household business) comes home and hears party sounds. He asks the servant he encounters what's happening? He didn't know there was a party planned for today. The servant tells him that his long lost brother came home! His father ordered a party and feast to be held in the son's honour. And the older brother's insides turn hot with anger, disappointment and jealousy. He's been the one CARING for literally everything while his brother was away. He's been the one who listens to the ugly gossip about his family at the market, who tried to shield his parents from the worst of it. He's been the one to watch all of this pain and shame that his brother caused, and HE never once got a party! Never would have asked for such an audacious thing as a feast, let alone his share of the inheritance. He refuses to go inside. Word gets back to the father, inside at the feast, and he comes out to talk to his eldest. The older son can no longer hold all his feelings inside and he lets his father have it. Listing all the hurts he's been carrying, and his anger at his party for the brother who made all the wrong choices. The father listens, letting his son's anger surround him and he says, "I get it. Nothing you're saying is untrue. But I love you too, everything I have is yours, but your brother, who we all thought was dead, is home. Let's celebrate!"

I just love that story. I've heard this parable preached in various ways from the perspectives of various characters in the story. Sometimes it's taught a morality tale, of look what happens when you make bad choices like the son. Sometimes it's taught as a story of overcoming shame and embarrassment, you can always come home to God, to the church. Other times it's the older brother's story who gets told, reminding us that those of who are "on the inside" and "make right choices" don't get to judge others. But rarely, if ever, have I heard the story preached from the point of view of the Father, a tale of lavish, audacious, reckless forgiveness and love.

But this is exactly how NT Wright frames this biblical story in his book, *The Lord and His Prayer*. He says, "One of the most vivid images in the whole New Testament is that of a man running. These days, people of all sorts run to keep fit. Even presidents and politicians have been known to don jogging suits, and even to be photographed taking exercise. But in Jesus' world, the more senior you were in a community, the less likely you were to even walk fast. It shows a lack of dignity, of gravitas. So when Jesus told the story about a man running, this was designed to have the same effect on his audience as we would experience if, say, the Prime Minister were to show up for state opening of Parliament wearing a bathing costume. It's a total loss of dignity. And when we discover why this man is running, the effect is even more shocking. This man is running to greet someone: someone who has put a curse on him, who has brought disgrace on the whole family. We call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but it might equally be called the Parable of the Running Father." *The Parable of the Running Father*.

Let's look back at the parable a bit again, taking that perspective, the idea of the story being about the Father, rather than either of the sons. The culture in Jesus' time was very much an honor and shame based culture. One was expected to behave in accordance with certain social values or ideas, or face shame and scorn, even further than scorn and shame would affect not just you, but your entire family. Your bad choices could cut everyone off, but the same token,

your family could disown you, declare you dead, and thereby hang on to some of your social standing, some of their social power and capital. Certainly, the father in this parable could have behaved in his way, could have preserved the family's honour and status, that would have been a believable response to those listening to Jesus tell this story.

And so, the twist of the parable for that first century audience is that not only does the father behave how we expect him to, he does the exact opposite- and he does it with flair. With audacity, he takes a story about honour and shame and instead tells a story about love and forgiveness. The story of the Prodigal Son is really the Story of the God who RUNS. A God who forgives with complete indiscriminatio

And although North American culture is not a Honor/Shame Culture, we still have our own counterfeit notions of what forgiveness is and how it functions, says Wright, "We need shocking stories like the running father, because our generation has either forgotten about forgiveness, or trivialise it. Once you replace morality with the philosophy that says, "if it feels good, do it' there isn't anything to forgive; if you still feel hurt by something, our culture suggests that you should simply retreat into your private work and pretend it didn't happen. In that sort of world, I don't need God to forgive me, and I don't need to forgive anybody else, either. Or, if people do still think about forgiveness of small-scale private sins. They hope God will forgive their peccadillos, and they try to smile benignly on their neighbours' follies. Instead of forgiveness, our generation has been taught a vague notion of 'tolerance'. This is, at best, a low-grade parody of forgiveness. At worst, it's a way of sweeping the real issues in human life under the carpet. If the Father in the story had intended merely to tolerate the son, he would not have been running down the road to meet him. Forgiveness is richer and higher and harder and more shocking than we usually think. Jesus' message offers the genuine article, and insists that we should accept no man-made substitutes.

It's the forgiveness that we see exhibited in the Father in this story that shows us how Jesus forgives us - not counting our failings against us, always ready to embrace us, literally running towards us to be in joyous relationship with us again. So, when in the Lord's Prayer we pray "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us", we're coming to God as the son came to the Father, ready to be forgiven, loved and restored to relationship. This is also the first time in the Lord's Prayer that we ourselves are asked to do something. "As we forgive those who trespass against us." Help us Lord to forgive one another as you have forgiven us. We're being asked to forgive one another just as the father in the story forgave his son. So, think of that posture, that abandonment, that openness exhibited by the father and suddenly NT Wright's description of God's forgiveness as the genuine article becomes much more true. He says, "Prayer and life are here locked indissolubly together. And please note: this ISN'T saying that we do this in order to earn God's forgiveness. It's a further statement of our loyalty to Jesus and his Kingdom. Claiming this central blessing of the Kingdom (forgiveness) only makes sense if we are living by the same central blessing ourselves... We are now called to be the people through whom the unique victory of Calvary and Easter is implemented in and for the whole world." I read this to Taylor and he said, "No pressure." This radical forgiveness is one of the key things that distinguishes us as Builders of God's Culture.

A word of caution here, forgiveness has sometimes been used by those in power to keep themselves in power. How many women throughout church history have been told to forgive their abuser because that's what Jesus would do? How many times has the person with the least agency and power been told to offer forgiveness rather than the wrongdoer been told to repent and seek justice and make restitution? God speaks strongly to those who harm the weak, the vulnerable, and the innocent. Jesus' command for radical forgiveness does not mean when allowing people, ourselves included, to be abused.

And feel that tension, between the very clear call to radical forgiveness to others (especially those who are within the family of faith!), but also the reality that people I know and love have been harmed by the church, its structures and people of faith. And I can't imagine telling an old friend, for whom even walking into a church, any church, causes her body to go into fight or flight mode, "oh, you just need to forgive." How to hold justice and forgiveness together is something that I don't have a clear answer for.

What I do know is this. The radical forgiveness of Jesus, the God who Runs, is our Lord and our saviour. And because of that, we as the people of God, must believe that radical forgiveness to one another is possible, even though it's the hardest work in the world, even though it may take years and years or a whole life to get to place of that forgiveness towards some people, but it's worth believing in and believing that the Holy Spirit can help us do things that feel impossible.

When I think about marriages that I admire, it's not the marriages or relationships where people have always got along fairly well, the relationships that have an easy rhythm and stability about them. The marriage that I admire most are the ones that fight to stay together, the ones that visit therapy (sometimes many times), the ones who chose everyday to say "we love each other and we choose each other, even though it's hard.", those are the marriages I look up to. Because radical love and forgiveness is not easy, but Jesus never promises us that it will be. He does promise that he will be with us, that he will run towards us, and forgive us our debts as we forgive those in debt to us. Thanks to God!

Switching gears a bit now, rather than closing our time of worship by reading another version of the Lord's Prayer, we'll listen to one instead. A couple of weeks ago, Roger played me the song "The Lord's Prayer" by Sister Janet Mead. He said they used to sing at SCBI.

This song has a fun history. Sister Janet Mead was a Catholic Nun who served with the Sisters of Mercy. Her song, **The Lord's Prayer**" is a pop rock setting of the Lord's Prayer with music by Arnold Strals recorded in 1973 by the Australian nun Sister Janet Mead.<sup>[1][2]</sup> Mead was known for pioneering the use of contemporary rock music in celebrating the Roman Catholic Mass and for her weekly radio programs.<sup>[3]</sup>

The recording was produced by Martin Erdman and originally released by Festival Records in Australia.<sup>[3]</sup> After reaching number three on the charts in Australia, it went on to become an international hit, selling nearly three million copies worldwide and making the upper reaches of the pop charts in countries as diverse as Canada, Japan, Brazil, Germany and the United States.<sup>[1]</sup>

Mead was nominated for a grammy, but lost to Elvis. And apparently, not everyone was so taken by this spunky setting of our Lord's prayer. Upon hearing the song, Mead's overseeing Priest apparently said, "Well, I suppose we're just trying to be a bunch of baptists now!"

So, let us, as a bunch of Mennonites, listen to a Catholic Song that's got some Baptist flair to it.

