

The First Baptist Church, Midland  
August 7, 2011  
Luke 15:11-32

***The Healing Power of Forgiveness***  
A Communion Meditation by the Rev. John P. Dick  
Theme: God's Forgiveness

This parable which we refer to as The Prodigal Son is a fascinating study in human nature. As it unfolds, we find ourselves meeting a son who is incredibly selfish and a father who is wonderfully selfless. One has no scruples while the other is scrupulous, and in this simple saga we experience an amazing thing called grace and a miraculous thing called forgiveness. Oh my... how Jesus could weave a story.

Without a doubt, this is an encounter which transcends culture for it has found a home in the hearts of people the world around. Maybe that is because anyone who has ever loved a child can identify with the intimacy of this exchange. The one who is lost, is found.

It is intriguing that many years ago the Russian ballet took hold of this passionate tale and the lead was played by an artist named Baryshnikov. It's ironic that the very society that once stood completely opposed to Christianity would find itself giving expression to one of our faith's beautiful and powerful stories in the context of its own most prized cultural resource, the ballet.

Now I confess that I am far from expert on this art form and I probably wouldn't do very well trying to emulate Baryshnikov. But I can use words to describe the climax of this extraordinary ballet.

The father is dressed in splendor. It is obvious that he is a person of considerable power and significant means. And if you use your imagination, you can see him standing on a platform stage right where he is posed with his arms outstretched.

Then suddenly and dramatically, a spotlight shines through the dark on the opposite side of that same stage and you see a bedraggled figure who has obviously been defeated by life. His belabored body shouts of his contrite spirit. The dancer is the destitute prodigal son. He is so broken that he cannot even walk. But slowly and tortuously he crawls his weary way across the stage.

At last he reaches the platform where his father is still standing with arms outstretched. For a moment you have forgotten father because you have been so focused upon the son. But now their two lives are coming together once more.

With his weak and weary hands, the prodigal manages to take hold of his progenitor's feet. With tears of repentance streaming down his face, he musters what little strength he has remaining to pull himself up to his father's knees. He is holding on now with a desperate kind of love. And then, as you are absolutely riveted to the passion of this moment, Baryshnikov somehow leaps upward into his father's outstretched arms. And now, you are weeping too and

you join with the spontaneity of the audience and you cheer as the loving father cradles his wayward child.

It's an incredible scene? You can feel the love... it's palpable. And I don't have to tell you, do I, that you are the prodigal? And I don't have to tell you either that God is your loving father. However, there is something I do need to say that perhaps you didn't capture during this retelling.

As I understand the way Jesus told this story in the third gospel there is one verse that the Russian interpretation somehow seems to overlook. Listen as Luke writes to say: **“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.”** (Luke 15:20)

The point is not to be disregarded or taken lightly because it focuses the meaning of this exchange between father and son. You see, our God isn't standing on the side of life's stage waiting for us to wearily drag ourselves through the barrenness of our broken lives. Our God comes running eager to meet us... eager to greet us... eager to receive us... eager to forgive us and yes, most of all... eager to love us.

God knows who we are and the way we fail and fall through life. God understands the nature of our sin and the desires of the heart. The Creator knows it isn't a perfect world and accepts the fact that the creation is going to stumble. But in spite of our unsteadiness, the Perfect One runs toward us and reaches out to our imperfection. Put another way, God takes the initiative to forgive our sins.

This morning we come to the Lord's Table. We visit this place over and over again because it reminds us of all God has done to reclaim his children. On our own, we would never be worthy of the wonderful gift of eternal life. Nor would we ever earn our way into heaven's kingdom. But through the sacrifice of Jesus and the grace of God, it all changes. And this table reminds us of this good news.

Yes, in this very place our loving Father has prepared a banquet in our honor. And here's the best part... it doesn't matter how long we have been prodigals. It doesn't matter how long we have been away from home. All that matters is that we are here today. All that matters is that we, like the prodigal in Luke's story, are ready to say, **Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you...** (Luke 15:21)

I know it's hard to believe there can be a God of such incredible grace. *But there is!* I know it's hard to believe that the heavens celebrate and rejoice when one who is lost returns. *But they do!* I know it's hard to believe that the things we do as human beings to break the heart of God can be so easily forgiven. *But they are!* So great is the compassion and so tender are the mercies of God.

So on this special morning, dear prodigal, let me invite you to come to the table which has been set in your honor. And as you find your way to the broken bread, let me encourage you to gratefully focus upon the cross. And as you lift the cup to your lips, let me hearten you to

look within and to confess those places where you have failed to be all that God intends for you to be.

Then, as you savor the meaning of this moment be assured that God is listening to your every word... hurting where you hurt, crying where you cry, and laughing where you laugh. Because don't forget, a banquet is a festive time and on this day we celebrate the good news that we are forgiven as we hear the wonderful words once more: **"If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."** (I John 1:9)

Now in these closing moments consider one more image. Close your eyes. Picture the stage which is dark once more and in the shadows envision the figure with arms outstretched embracing the child. Now concentrate and look real close. Who do you see? Who is that child? Hopefully you're gazing upon your own reflection.

Now, step back and look into the father's face. Watch his lips as they move and whisper so only you can hear... *My child, I love you and forgive you. I'm here for you. Though once upon a time you were lost, now you are found. WELCOME HOME!*

Amen and AMEN!