

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, September 14, 2025

Friends, as we prepare our hearts to hear the reading and proclamation of God's word, I invite you to get comfortable in your pew, close your eyes, maybe whatever is most comfortable to you, and take a deep breath in and breathe it out slowly. Another deep breath in and breathe it out slowly. Breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others. Breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Let us pray. Good and gracious God, you are as close to us as our very next breath. And so we pray that you might make yourself known, that you might make yourself known in this time by quieting us. That we might hear the word you have for us this day. That we might hear it, and that in hearing it we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Friends, we're going to read from the Gospel according to Luke in just a moment, chapter 15: 11-32. If you spent time in church, then this story will probably be familiar to you. It's a parable that Jesus tells, but the context is important. The context might not be as familiar to you. I want to begin in the first verse of chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke. It says this.

"Now, the tax collectors and sinners were all gathered around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" Jesus hears this muttering as he's standing there teaching, right? And as Whitney shared with our children, as they learned in their formation hour before this worship service, he hears and he desires for them to learn. Okay? And so he begins to teach not only those who have gathered around, the ones that are called tax collectors and sinners, but also in this moment, he is teaching the Pharisees and the teachers as well. So he begins by teaching them about lost sheep. He's trying to teach them about the love of God and the grace of God, and they do not get it. Okay? They're angry and they're jealous about how God's love works, especially as Jesus is living that love, making that love manifest in the world. Therefore, the tax collectors and the sinners, they're not real to the Pharisees and the teachers. So he begins to teach them, and he says the love of God is like...it's like a lost sheep. There's 99 sheep that are all gathered together, and God is like the shepherd who sees that there is one sheep that is missing, and God goes after that one. Right? He gives them a reference that they might be able to connect with. But you imagine they're still murmuring, still muttering to themselves and loud enough so other people can hear, right? Discrediting him or they think they are. So he says, "Okay, I'll do something that y'all understand. Y'all understand money, right? The love of God is something like a coin, a really precious coin. It's been lost, right?" And he tells this parable about the lost coin, and they don't get it. They're still murmuring. They're still muttering, okay, about this love and this grace that he is living out in the world. So then he says, I'm going to make this human for you. Often we need

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that when we're...when we're struggling with something, when we're wrestling with something, it's one thing to wrestle with it in theory or, in our case, theologically, wrestle with it theologically. It's another thing altogether to wrestle with something when it has a human connection. Okay? It teaches us in a different way. We are able to connect with it in a different way when it's not about an object or about animals but about human beings. Okay? And that's where he is when he begins this parable. This parable that we have come to know as a parable of the prodigal son, or others might call it the parable of the forgiving father. Let's start in verse 11.

Jesus continued, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So the father divided his property between them, the two brothers. Not long after that, the younger son got together all that he had and set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in the whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him into his fields to feed his pigs. The son longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death? I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants." And so the son got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and filled with compassion for him, he ran to his son. He threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick. Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate together. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. "Your brother has come home," he replied. "And your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound." The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him, but he answered his father, "Look, all these years I have slaved for you, never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill a fattened calf for him."

My son, the father said, "You are always with me and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found."

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The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So Jesus realizes that it's not going to be a farming story or a banking story. It's going to be a human story that helps the Pharisees and the teachers and all those other ones who have gathered around understand the way in which the love and grace of God work. It's going to be a human story that they can connect with. And if you're anything like me, this is the sort of learning that is essential for you, right? I can think about things in theory, but I need a human connection. I think we're all like that more often than not. You don't understand what it means to live with depression or anxiety until you talk to somebody who's navigated it. You don't understand what it looks like to be divorced unless you talk to a couple who's experienced it. You don't understand what it looks like to have to file for bankruptcy until you talk to a friend who's had to do it. We don't understand, more often than not, until there's a human connection. We see that in our ministries here as well. You don't understand the plight of the refugee until you work with our No Longer Strangers ministry, and you watch as a family comes here because they can no longer be in the place that they called home forever. Right? And we see this over and over and over again. And by God's grace, more often than not, when we make a human connection to a story, it clicks in a different way for us than it has before. I think Jesus knows this. He is our great rabbi, our great teacher, right? And so, he's giving this opportunity to the Pharisees and to the teachers. He's giving them a human story. And it's a story of a father and two sons, right? And they would have understood the complexities of this story. They would have understood the ways in which those relationships were beautiful and maybe even fraught in their time. They would have understood the initial reaction of the younger son when he goes to his father and he says, "Give me what is mine." They would have understood the transactional nature of that relationship. Okay, that's what would have happened, right? The passing down of wealth generation to generation, property from generation to generation. That would have resonated with them, right? So the younger son goes and says, "Give me what is mine, father." He sees his relationship with his father as transactional. That's the way in which they connect. You have what will be mine. I'll take it now. Thank you very much. And the story goes that he takes what he believes to be his and he goes off and in wild living, gosh, in the age of vlogs, right? I just wonder how many followers the younger son would have gained by vlogging his life as he went off to the distant land. Some of y'all don't know what a vlog is, right? But it's...we had one of the most important streamers in our country...was actually here in Memphis this week. You should go look it up. Had some great things to say. People stream their lives, and it draws in a great number of people. We don't get that here. We don't know exactly what this young man lived, but what we do know is that whatever it was, it was so wild that he bankrupted himself. and he's hungry and he's desperate. And so he's feeding pigs, which would have been disgraceful. And every day as he's throwing the feed, those pods into the trough, he's looking every day. And every day those pods

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become more and more of a temptation to him. Often when we are desperate, things that will not provide us nourishment begin to be more and more appealing to us, right? He's doing that, and I love how the scripture puts it, "When he came to his senses." You can imagine there was one day when he's throwing the feed into the trough, and he has this epiphany. Let's call it spirit that shows up and says, "Why are you doing this? What's going on? I mean, the people who serve your father live a better life than you do, right? Go back. Go back and be with him." And he does what a lot of us do when we have that sort of epiphany, whether it's something that we expected or not. He begins to think about how he's going to greet his father. I used to do this when my parents would put me in timeout, right? My mother would say to me, "I need you to rehearse how you're going to say you're sorry to your sister, right? or to me or to your father. I wasn't sorry, right? But I needed to rehearse what I was going to say when I came out of timeout. Okay, timeout was like 15 minutes. It felt like an eternity. This man, this man's been living it for a while, right? And he begins to rehearse. "All right, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be your son. Make me one of your servants. Okay, I'm ready." And he makes his way back. and all the best laid plans that he has are gone in an instant because his father sees him far off and begins to run to him, Jesus says, begins to run to him, laying aside all dignity and embraces him, hugs him. And you can imagine the son had no idea what to do. He ...the only way, because he still thought this was a transaction, he thought he would give the speech. He'd make the concession, right? He'd give the confession because that's how it works, right? And then maybe maybe the father would receive him. And it turns out even as he repeats it, his father ignores it, right? And he turns, the father does, and says, "Bring the fattened calf. Tell everybody he's back. Set the table. Start the music. We are going to celebrate together. because this one who was lost has been found. This one who was dead is alive again."

Here's what my imagination tells me. The father saw himself in his son. This is something else my parents would do. Maybe if you have parented children, you do this as well. When I would do something exemplary, my father would say, "Oh, that reminds me of that thing your mother does." Right? Or if I did something that got me in trouble, my mother would say, "Oh, that reminds me of that thing that your father does." Right? Y'all never credited the best in your children to yourself, I'm sure. Right. But what I imagine is that there's a part of the father who sees himself in the son that's come home, right? But not just in the coming home part, in the reckless part.

In the reckless, wasteful part. In the part that has seen love and grace as transactional. Give me what is mine. Or I will speak a word of, you know, I'll speak a word of truth and then maybe you'll forgive me. Right? I think he sees himself in his son, and he wants to embrace that part of himself, but also his son. And so he brings him back and they're all celebrating and almost

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everyone is celebrating. But the news didn't quite get to the other son. No, he's diligent. He's the rule follower. And it turns out he is also frugal when it comes to grace and love. He understands love and grace as transactional as well, but in a different sort of way. And maybe you might see yourself in the older son as well. He thinks if he does all the right things, says the right words, stays the right amount of time, then that will gain him love and grace. Which is why when the one who doesn't do that is being celebrated, he's angry. He's frustrated. He refuses to come inside, scripture says. And I love that the father leaves the party, because I think the father sees a bit of himself in the older son as well. He's been the one that's also followed the rules, that's done the diligent work, right? That's been present when other people weren't. He's done the faithful thing. And he needs his older son to know that he is deeply loved, but it is not because of what he has done. It is because the same grace and love that covers the wasteful extravagantly, the one who has gone off—that son, it's the same love that covers him.

Here's what I wonder. I wonder how the Pharisees and the teachers heard it. I wonder if they got it. Jesus starts telling these stories because his desire is for them to know that while “y'all believe this is transactional. In fact, y'all are the people who are facilitating the transaction. You believe that you hold within your hands the grace of God and you bestow it upon these poor sinners when they come to you and that is the end of things. What I'm telling you is that that's not how it works. What I'm telling you is that the grace of God doesn't work in the transactional way that you believe it does. Do you get it?”

And I think maybe the question that we might infer at the end of this text for the Pharisees and the teachers is a question for us this morning. What are the ways in which we are understanding God's love and grace as transactional instead of relational this morning? What's the relationship in your life that has become more about what you give to it and what you get from it than just about freely giving? I've seen it happen in marriages where it becomes transactional, in relationships, in friendships where it becomes transactional. We give so that we can get. We give so that we can get. That's how it has to work. And it's not...it's not all that wild for us to fall into that pattern. I mean, everywhere in our lives, in society, that's how it works, right? You're going to show up to work tomorrow morning if you are working right now. You're going to put in your hours and you're going to get a paycheck from it, right? It's a transaction. Um, you're going to...you're going to go to the bank and you're going to deposit some money in and take some money out, right? It's a transaction. You're going to go to the Cupboard today after worship. You're going to give them money. They're going to give you food. It's a transaction, right? Everywhere in our world is transactional. And it's understandable if we fall into that pattern. But Jesus is telling the story to shake the religious people out of that reality. He's telling the story to say it might be transactional everywhere else, but it's not here and not with me. It might be

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transactional in the ways that you've been taught, Pharisees and teachers, but it's not transactional here. I wonder what relationship in your life has become transactional. What have you been dulled to to not see the other as fully human? Instead, it's just...just somebody, right? I think Jesus tells us this story for two reasons. The first is so that we can see our neighbor. Those who are closest to us, those who live in our homes, those who we rear, but also those who are a great distance from us as fully human, not just those who, yeah, those who are worthy of love and grace fully. I think that's part of it, because I think Jesus sees that we are both of these sons. Okay. We are sometimes wasteful and irresponsible, and we are sometimes rigid and frugal. Sometimes we are prodigal, right, and sometimes we are stingy.

I think the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that the love and the grace of God is not compelled by transaction. It is received as a gift. Okay. So here's my hope for you today. My hope for our church. Pay attention this week to what feels like it's become transactional to you. Maybe it's a relationship. Maybe it's your faith, right? And then read the story again. 21 verses. Make it human. Think about the person that you've become transactional with. Make them fully human. But know this. No matter where you find yourself this day, whether you're the reckless one or the frugal one, the love of God welcomes us all to that banquet, to that party, right? If it doesn't make sense, if it doesn't make sense to you with a farming story or a story about money, maybe it'll make sense when you look another in the eyes and you see them to be fully beloved in the sight of God.

Let's pray together. Gracious and loving one, we don't understand your love. Far too often we think it works the same way that everything else works in this society. We think we invest in and then we receive. We take a withdrawal from what we've invested. But that's...that's not how it works, God. And we know that from this story. What we pray for, Lord, is the ability to actually live that out in the world, to know it to be true for ourselves and also true for our neighbors. What we pray for, Lord, is that in our recklessness and in our frugality, Lord, you would remind us that your grace and your love are not to be earned or tallied. They are freely given to us. Awaken us to the places where we have reduced your love to a transaction instead of a relationship. And help us to know the good news that in Christ your love and your grace have been freely given to us. Help us to know it to be true this day and always. For it's in your name we pray. Amen.