

Welcome back home

2 in The God of the Second Chance

Message for Sunday, May 5, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Luke 15:11-32

Children's Message:

I'll throw a boomerang straight at someone in the congregation. Amazingly, it abruptly turns to the left and flies back to me! (This is not a real wooden boomerang, but one made of soft foam, so it's quite safe.) I'll let the children take turns trying it themselves.

Isn't it amazing how it comes back to you? Jesus told a story about a son who comes back home.

Jesus told this story about a son who wasted all his money. He had no money left, and he was starving. He came back home, thinking he might get work as a hired hand. But the father was delighted to welcome him back home as his son.

Jesus was telling this story in response to the question, "What does God think about sinners?" Jesus' answer: If we wander away from God, and say we're sorry, God always welcomes us back.

Thanks to Deane Hutton for this idea, in *Christian Parables from Science*.

Message: Welcome back home. # 2 in the series "The God of the Second Chance"

1) The power of the gospel of grace

I got this story from preacher Max Lucado, and he got it from a pastor in Brazil.

Christina had an infectious laugh which would fill a room with life. Her mother, Maria, had raised her by herself, since her husband had died when Christina was just an infant. Though Maria's salary as a maid afforded few luxuries, it was reliable and it did provide food and clothes.

Their small house was simple but adequate. It consisted of one large room, two small straw mattresses, one on each side of the room, a washbasin, and a wood-burning stove.

Christina spoke often of going to the city. She dreamed of trading her dusty neighbourhood for exciting avenues and city life. Just the thought of this horrified her mother. Maria was

always quick to remind Christina of the harshness of the streets.

"People don't know you there. Jobs are scarce and the life is cruel. And besides, if you went there, what would you do for a living?"

Maria knew exactly what Christina would do, or would have to do for a living.

That's why her heart broke when she awoke one morning to find her daughter's bed empty. Maria knew immediately where her daughter had gone. She also knew immediately what she must do to find her. She quickly threw some clothes in a bag, gathered up all her money, and ran out of the house.

On her way to the bus stop she entered a drugstore to get one last thing. Pictures.

She sat in the photograph booth, closed the curtain, and spent all she could on pictures of herself. With the purse full of small black-and-white photos, she boarded the next bus to Rio de Janeiro.

Maria knew Christina had no way of earning money. She also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to give up. When pride meets hunger, a human will do things that were before unthinkable. Knowing this, Maria began her search. Bars, hotels, nightclubs, any place with the reputation for prostitutes. She went to them all. And at each place she left her picture – taped on a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth. And on the back of each photo she wrote a note.

It wasn't too long before both the money and the pictures ran out, and Maria had to go home. The weary mother wept as the bus began its long journey back to her small village.

It was a few weeks later that young Christina descended the hotel stairs. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth, but spoke of pain and fear. Her laughter was broken. Her dream had become a nightmare. A thousand times over she had longed to trade these countless beds for her plain stuffed mattress. Yet the little village was, in too many ways, too far away.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. She looked again,

and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother.

Christina's eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back was this compelling invitation. "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home."

She did.

I've heard many stories like that; stories where Jesus' parable of the lost son is lived out in real modern life. They always bring a smile to my face and a tear to my eye. They show the incredible power of what is possible when we take the gospel of grace and apply it to our lives.

2) What does God think about people who sin?

But we need to remember: when Jesus told this story of the lost son, he was not giving advice on how to raise children. The purpose of the parable of the prodigal is to tell us what God is like.

Here is the setting for telling the story:

Luke 15:1-3, New International Version:
Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Then Jesus told them this parable.

Actually, three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. All are about someone losing something, and the exuberant joy when the lost is found. Or, in the case of the prodigal, when the lost son returns home.

Jesus is painting a word picture of what God thinks about people who have rejected him and followed a life of sin. God is crazy in love over them; and when one of them repents and comes back to God, God throws a party in heaven. This is how Jesus describes the scene:

Luke 15:10, New International Version:

"In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Henri Nouwen points out:

God rejoices. Not because the problems of the world have been solved, not because all human pain and suffering have come to an end, nor because thousands of people have been converted and are now praising him for his goodness. No, God rejoices because *one* of his children who was lost has been found."¹

This is more than just good news! This is *amazing, incredible, wonderful* news! There is hope after all. God says to everyone the same thing that Christina's mother said to her: "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home." God is the God of second chances.

3) What about *really* bad people?

I remember twenty or so years ago I preached on this theme of God's amazing grace. Paul Bernardo was in the news at the time; he's the man who raped and tortured and murdered several young women. To make the point that God desires that everyone—*everyone*—would come back to him, I said that if Paul Bernardo repented of his sin—not just pretending to be sorry in order to get a lighter sentence, but truly repented—God would have a party for him just like in Jesus' parable. A number of people said to me after that service, "Bruce, I get the idea. But that's taking it too far."

Well, at the risk of upsetting people here as well, I'm still saying the same thing: *no one* is beyond God's grace.

Romans 2:5-6, New Living Translation:

For there is going to come a day of judgement when God, the just judge of all the world, will judge all people according to what they have done.

Who is the judge? God. So when we condemn others, we are playing God!

¹ Quoted by Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?*, p. 47.

Author and preacher Max Lucado commented on this passage:

The key word here is *judges*. It's one thing to have an opinion. It's quite another to pass a verdict. It's one thing to have a conviction; it's another to convict the person. It's one thing to be repulsed at the actions of [*name of evil person*]. It's another thing entirely to claim that I am superior, or that he is beyond the grace of God.

This doesn't mean that we never say to someone, "What you are doing is wrong." There is a time and a place for that. What it means is that we do not become arrogant, by presuming to be the one in authority.

Our problem is that we compare ourselves to others around us, others like us. Someone like Paul Bernardo is so far below our idea of goodness that we assume God could never love or forgive someone like that. What we should be doing is comparing ourselves to Jesus. *We* are the ones who are so far below God's idea of goodness that it's amazing that God could ever love or forgive us. If there's no grace for some, then there's no grace for any of us.

But the wonderful good news is that God loves you—yes, you; yes, just the way you are; yes, with all your faults and secrets. Not because you are so good. But because God is so good.

God says to you, "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home."

Next Steps:

Two ways we can respond to the God of the second chance:

a) Listen to God calling you, and answer

Maybe you're like the lost son, or like Christina. You've left God behind, and you've lived life your own way. And every now and then you've felt this urge, you've heard this whisper, "I love you. I miss you. Will you come back home to me?" You've always said, "I don't need that stuff."

But today, right now, you're wondering, "What if...?" Look at where living my own way has got me. Oh sure, I may be successful in other people's eyes, but I know there's something missing."

If that's you, then I encourage you, right now, to open yourself to God. You can pray with me:

Lord God,

I'm so thankful that you love me, just the way I am. I've made mistakes, I've hurt people, and others have hurt me too. I'm so thankful that I can count on your love.

I turn away from all that is wrong in my life, and I turn to you, to follow your ways. I thank you for Jesus, who gave his life so that I can be cleansed from all sin.

Fill me with your Holy Spirit, so that I will have the power to keep this promise. Change not just my outside behaviour; but change me from the inside out. Mold me and shape me to become the person I was meant to be.

This is my prayer, my heart's desire. I come in the name of Jesus. Amen.

b) Tell someone else the good news

Maybe you are already following Jesus, or maybe you just started. Either way, fantastic!

But don't keep the good news to yourself. Think: who do you know that could really use a lift? Who could really use some good news? Why not get together with that person and let them in on it? Tell them what Jesus means in your life. Invite them to come to church with you to hear the rest of the series on the God of the second chance.