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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
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Jesus' stories, never like one of those old jokes that you've heard too many times and you go "yeah, yeah, yeah" or a movie you saw once and that was one time too many. Jesus' stories are always like those movies that you can see over and over, maybe something like "It's A Wonderful Life" at Christmas or one of our family's favorites "Independence Day," the world is under attack by aliens and the president is calling the forces to try to fight back, and he makes this eloquent speech where he says, "We can't be consumed by our petty differences any longer. The Fourth of July will no longer be known as an American holiday but the day that the world with one voice said 'We will not go quietly into the night, we will survive.'...This is our Independence Day" It's so moving. It just gets you fired up to see it. Jesus' stories are always good and as we hear them again and again, we discover new hidden miracles of healing in each story.

The story of the prodigal son, utterly familiar. I think when I was growing up, maybe I heard a sermon on this when I went to visit my grandparents and it's fairly familiar and it's in the story, the idea that we are prone to wander, that we have gone off into a foreign land away from God. We've been self-indulgent, but God pleads with us to come home and when we come to our senses, we turn around. We come home. God the Father welcomes us. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." The grace of God, each one of us turning to God for the healing, the forgiveness that we need. I love the line in "The Shack." "The Shack" you know is that novel that for awhile was way more popular than the Bible itself. In "The Shack," Jesus is asked "Do all paths lead to you?" And Jesus says "Oh, no, but there's no path I won't take to find you." There's no path God won't take to find us. That's the first hidden miracle in the story of the prodigal son.

There's more to this. I went off to seminary and began to study scripture and I learned some things that blew my mind. If you had been among Jesus' first hearers of this story, you would have been struck by a property rights issue. Parents in those days would often give their estate to their children and the expectation was their children would take care of that estate so that they could take care of their parents in their old age. So, because this boy goes off and squanders it for his own personal pleasure, he basically is saying to his father, "I don't care about you. I don't care what happens to you in your old age," raising some interesting questions, right? About what we do with our property that may feel to God like we're saying, "God, I don't really care about you, it's just for me." And the other interesting thing, the boy is in the pig sty. It doesn't say that he had a meeting with God, that he was moved by the Holy Spirit, that he had some dramatic conversion experience. It simply says that he got so desperately hungry, and he had no place else to turn, that he came home, that he came home, no place else to turn.

As we think about the story we discover that there is not one but there are two prodigal sons. There's the one obviously who flees his father; he really doesn't understand his father's love, does he? But there is the other prodigal son, that older son who was smug, who has never done anything wrong, who has always been there. He's got the stellar work ethic and yet he also

has never understood his father's love. It's the second hidden healing in the story of the prodigal son.

There are many people – and it's sad, isn't it? – who have been sitting in a church pew all their lives. Sometimes people say to me "Aw, I've been a member of the church for seven years," or "I've been a member of the church for 37 years." You can be a member of the church for a very long time and never understand the love of God. You can be a church member all your life and miss out on the joy of salvation. It's sad. The second miraculous healing, even the elder brother can be healed.

The miracle in the story that's interesting to me today is this. The healing in this story isn't just two solo people with their own personal need to connect with Jesus. The healing also is between the brothers. They need each other. They need to reconcile with each other in order to be one with their father. The funny thing about elder brothers, they enjoy each other's company immensely and younger brothers enjoy each other's company immensely, but for us to grow and be close to God, elder brothers need to connect with younger brothers.

I went off to seminary and was learning about these things and about that time there was a TV mini-series that came out called "Jesus of Nazareth" and when it was announced, I'll just be honest with you, the very intelligent, haughty academic theologians at Duke University looked down their nose at this prospect that Jesus was going to be delivered up to Hollywood. They said, "No good can come from Jesus being on television. They'll just make a show out of it." They made a wonderful show out of it. It was marvelous. It was moving. And the most marvelous moment I think came when Jesus told the prodigal son story. The moviemaker had the brilliant insight to dovetail two moments of Jesus' life together. One is all those times when critics were very unhappy with Jesus because he eats with tax collectors, he eats with sinners, he eats with prostitutes, and Jesus telling of the story. The way it unfolds in the TV mini-series is Jesus tells his disciples that he's going to the home of Matthew, the tax collector. Peter, the consummate elder brother, steps forward and announces that Jesus will not go "because he's a tax collector, he rips us off, he has raucous parties and hangs around with loose women. You cannot go there. It will ruin our movement." But Jesus says, "I'm going, I'm going." He begins to walk away toward Matthew's home. Peter is fuming. He says, "It's time to leave. You've gone too far this time. It's too much. We can't keep following him," but he can't quite let it go, so he follows at a distance. Jesus arrives at Matthew's home and Matthew is shocked that a Jewish teacher has come to his home. He says "Welcome, Rabbi." And Jesus comes in and there's a wild party, indeed, going on in that home. The people were amazed by the storyteller who has shown up. Jesus says, "Can I tell you a story?" And they say "Please." Now about this time Peter has made it to the door of Matthew's house. He's peaking in to see how badly this will go. Jesus begins the story. "There was a certain man who had two sons and the younger son said, 'Father, give me the estate that's coming to me' so his father did, and he went away into a far country and he squandered it all in riotous living." And the people at the party, you see, began to see themselves in this story. Jesus said, "Eventually a famine came over the land, and there was no food to eat and the young boy persuaded a farmer to let him feed the pigs, and even the husks that he gave the pigs began to look tasty to him. No one gave him anything. Finally in that pig sty he said, 'Even my father's servants have enough food. I will go home to my father and ask him to make me one of his hired hands.' So he went on his way. While he was still some

distance off, the father saw him coming and the father ran and embraced him and kissed him. The boy said, "Father, I am no longer worthy to be called even your son." But the father said "No, no, no. Bring the best robe, bring rings, put them on his fingers, bring sandals and put them on his feet, kill the fatted calf, for this my son was lost and is found. My son was dead and now he is alive." And the people in the room were moved by this. Peter is looking into the door. Jesus turns toward him and says, "About this time the older brother who was working in the field hears the sound of music and dancing. He inquired what was going on and he was told. And he was very angry. His father asked him to come into the party but he refused. He said "I have worked for you all these years. I have never once been disobedient to you. You never gave me as much as a goat so that I could have a party. And now this son has come home. He has spent your money on prostitutes and you throw a party for him." And the father says "lease, please try to understand. This, my son, was lost and is found. He was dead and he is alive again." Peter gets it and begins to enter the room, comes near Jesus. Matthew comes near Jesus. And these two men who five minutes before had loathed one another embraced.

The third miracle in the story of the prodigal son is reconciliation. This is what Christians do. We do not stay at odds with one another. We make peace with one another. It's hard. We're not able to do it. It requires a miracle of God's grace. I saw such a miracle three weeks ago. I was in Liberia preaching at their annual conference. They have had a Civil War for a couple of decades. As you can imagine, there were Methodists on either side of the war. We gathered at that conference and there were a group of people who were working at those folks who were at odds with one another, reconciling with each other. They came forward to the Lord's Table and they gathered around, arm in arm, and they bowed their heads, and they prayed together. Our society knows nothing of this. We know about winning. We know about being right.

I don't know about you, when I was 25 years old, it was very important to me to be right. As I get older, it's just overrated. We can always love, and Christians are the ones – we don't have to be right – but we can always love. We reconcile. We try to do this on the world stage, in the community and within the church and within our families, even within our own souls. The point finally comes that we realize that we are desperately hungry and there is nowhere else to come except to the Lord's Table. And we come and the feast is ready. We say "Lord, I'm not worthy to be called your son," but Jesus says "Oh, no, no, I'm glad that you have come, you and you and you and you." Together we seek peace and when we do we discover that today truly is our Independence Day. We are free. A third miracle of God's Grace.

Thanks be to God . Amen.