

Introduction:

- A. One thing I've learned studying Jesus' parables: they rarely say what you think they say the first time you hear them. Take the story of the prodigal son, for example.
- B. Turn to **Luke 15:1-2...** Tax collectors were corrupt traitors. They were Jews who played for the Romans *and* fleeced their countrymen in the process. They were. *Sinners* were a broad class of religious lowlifes, Jews who were a disgrace to their faith, if obeying it meant anything! And Jesus didn't seem to care that being with these bad people could compromise his credibility.
- C. Jesus told them a parable—a truth about God and his kingdom wearing a disguise. Who was Jesus talking to? That's the thing about a good story: everyone listens—scowling Pharisees, wary sinners, uneasy disciples, and us. Same story for everyone but it landed upon each heart differently.
- D. **V.11-12... I imagine the young man was sullen and defiant**, smoldering and cool at the same time. The boy didn't actually say, "I'm tired of waiting for you to die," but he might just as well have. He didn't say, "And I won't be coming home for your funeral when you do die," but that's what he meant.

I imagine a long silence; the glowering stare, clenched teeth, fingers nervously working at his side. You may know a son or daughter that callous but I'm not sure if anyone in Jesus' audience did. This was a culture where disobeying parents was in the same sin category as brutality or slander. That son wasn't just disowning and disrespecting his father, he was abandoning his people and his heritage. Even the worst sons they knew weren't *this* bad!

Plus, no one listening to Jesus could imagine a father agreeing to such a demand. He would lose face in the whole community. He would be as big a disgrace as his

son. The *kind* thing would have been *not* to disinherit him on the spot. *Justice* would have disowned him and kicked him out of the house empty-handed. The father didn't owe his son *anything*.

But after a long pause, this father said, "*I'll take care of it. I'll sell some of our land. You'll have the money.*" And the son, without so much as a thank-you, turned and stalked out, as if he was a conqueror when in fact he was very nearly a corpse.

A few days later, with more money in his pockets than he'd ever seen, he left home under the angry eyes of everyone in the community. That boy would never be welcome in that town again.

- E. **V.13...** The bright lights and the neon lies, the allure of the market and the velvet taste of nightlife—well, it was nothing like home. He felt good. This was the life.
- F. **V.14-16...** Fate twisted and he found himself broke in a nation of breadlines. The kid who had chafed under his father's love found himself serving pigs that had more to eat than he did. I don't know if he was homesick or sorry. It does tell you something when this guy thought of feeding pigs before he thought of going home. One thing was certain: he was humiliated and hungry. So, so hungry. Do you see those tax collectors listening to this? They knew, of course, this story wasn't just about that son. They knew that there are different kinds of starvation.
- G. If a person gets hungry enough they'll consider the unthinkable. **Vv.17-20...** Usually we think of this as the turning point—literally, the *turning* point—of the story. The son repents. We imagine his eyes filling with tears and his heart with remorse. Maybe. Maybe not. I've been persuaded by reading Kenneth E. Bailey that the son wasn't so much sorry as simply desperate. He prepared to do what he had to do; to say what he had to say in order to eat. Going home was his last resort.

He planned what to say: *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.”* That sounds great but Jesus’ audience recognized those words. One other guy in the Bible said the same thing. Pharaoh after the ninth plague. So Jesus’ listeners, who didn’t trust the kid in his story in the first place, had all the more reason for skepticism.

We have a name for prayers like that: foxhole prayers. *“God, I’m sorry for all I’ve done wrong. Get me out of this mess and I’ll be in church every Sunday.”*

You may have never heard that angle on the story before but it makes a lot of sense. God’s grace doesn’t start when we repent. Paul wrote, *“While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* Jesus said in **Jn 6:44**, *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them.”* Repentance isn’t really the first step in a homecoming. **Often it is nothing more than an aching hunger that sets a person on the road home to God.**

- H. Nothing is more beautiful than v.20: *“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”* What happens in a moment like that? What happens to such a son or daughter? The father, who had given his son his entire inheritance, gave him what he would have never asked for. The son, starving as he was, felt a new and greater longing than he had never known before.

In all that far country none of that money ever bought him such security as his father’s embrace, nor was any kiss so precious. In that famished far country, once his money ran out, “no one gave him anything.” But here in his father’s arms he was richer than anyone he knew.

Here, I think, is where the son’s heart changed. Here is where he *really* “came to his senses.” Not among the snuffling pigs, but in his father’s arms. Here is where the words he’d planned found his heart. Here, he finally

repented, and hugged his father back. The last words he'd planned to say—*"make me like one of your hired servants"*—fell away, useless.

- I. His father's response simply makes no sense because he seems oblivious to the son's sin. Vv.22-24... If you happened on this scene without knowing the backstory, all the hoopla would make you think that this son had survived a harrowing journey and that everyone had given him up for dead. You'd think he was the darling of the family, his father's favorite. Knowing the story, like the servants and neighbors, well, you'd be stunned.

The best robe, the ring, the new sandals. Why, you'd never know he had been a swineherd and beggar. The fattened calf? Why you'd never know he had been so hungry he would have eaten pig pods. The feast, the music and dancing. Why you'd never know he had broken his father's heart and been the outcast of the community. What you *would* know is, *"This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."* And what you might *not* realize is that the celebration is very near to what happens in heaven, among the angels, when one sinner repents.

- J. And that's only half the story! There's another son whose story we'll hear next week.

The tax collectors and sinners listened, and knew.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law listened, and stewed.

But there were others listening too: Jesus' disciples, and us.

God has given VCL a wonderful sense of being *home*. Remember what Lynne said before she was baptized last week: *"This church is home."* And this story that Jesus told is my all-time favorite *home* story. This story can shape our church.

I. WE ARE A CHURCH WHO ALWAYS SEES OURSELVES IN THIS STORY

- A. There are two sons in this story and neither of them honored their father. Both of them needed grace. One was ruined by his wild living and the other was ruined by his holier-than-thou self-righteousness. All of us are related to one of those two brothers.
- B. So in our church we help each other remember where we've come from—where we would be without Jesus. No one should ever walk among us and get the message that we're too good for them or that they're too bad for us. We strive to be righteous people, to be like Jesus, but none of us deserve to be part of the Father's family.

We always call the young man in this story the *prodigal son*. The word means *"exceedingly or recklessly wasteful."* That is certainly how the Pharisees saw the sinners gathered around Jesus. And they were. They had ignored God, squandered their religious birthright, and were no longer worthy of being called sons of Israel. But in Jesus' story, the father said, *"This son of mine was dead."* Not prodigal. Dead. *"He was lost,"* he said. Lost and dead are terrible conditions, but the condemnation is gone out of them. That's why Jesus died for our sins. To take away the condemnation. So what does that tell us as a church?

II. WE ARE A CHURCH WHO SEES LOST PEOPLE WHERE OTHERS SEE PRODIGALS

- A. God's people must treasure righteousness. We want to be holy people. What seems counterintuitive is that loving what is good doesn't keep us from befriending people who aren't. We want to be people who look for opportunities to be with those who don't care at all for our God and may never give a thought to being home with the Father. We befriend them because once they get a salty taste of Jesus from us they might start coming to their senses.
- B. In your Bible you could draw a light line from the phrase, *"while he was still a long way off his father saw him,"* back up to **v.1**, *"the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering*

around to hear Jesus.” Jesus was doing what the father in his story did. That’s what we’re doing.

C. **What’s the evangelism strategy of Village Church? Found people make friends with lost people for Jesus’ sake.**

Everyone far from God is inevitably getting hungrier and hungrier, and some know it. So be salty with compassion. Pray that God would give you open doors. Put some time and heart into relationships with people who aren’t close to God. We are God’s agents of grace. **When Jesus is with us and we’re with lost people, they tend to get homesick.**

III. WE ARE A CHURCH WHO BELIEVE THAT THE FATHER’S GRACE CAN CHANGE ANYONE’S HEART

- A. Grace is getting something for free that you cannot earn and would never deserve. Jesus’ gives us that. He gives us life now and forever. He brings us into the arms of the Father. He gives us a home and a heritage and a hope. And it is all grace.
- B. So here in our church we will give more than anyone deserves. We don’t actually start with lost people. We start with each other, because that’s harder. When we make our life together grace-filled, alive with Jesus, anyone who comes within our orbit will know that this is a place where the Father is waiting for them.

IV. WE ARE A CHURCH WHO CELEBRATES WHEN OUR FATHER FINDS OUR LOST BROTHERS AND SISTERS

- A. In the story, when the father says to the servants, “Let’s have a feast and celebrate,” that’s us! We’re the celebrating servants. Like last Sunday, when Linsey and Lynne were baptized. They came up out of the water and you all applauded. Next week when I tell you our latest white rose story you’ll all rejoice.
- B. Here at VCL we worship God for all kinds of good reasons—for all of his attributes and work—but what

really gets us happy is when lost people are found! And we never get tired of those stories and celebrations.

Conclusion

As I prepared, I kept thinking of a story Tony Campolo told a long time ago. He's a Christian sociologist. He was on vacation in Hawaii, suffering from jet lag, so he went to a greasy spoon café up the street at 3:30 in the morning. He was sitting there, nursing a cup of coffee, when in walked eight or nine prostitutes, taking the stools on both sides of him. They ignored him and talked around him. One woman mentioned that the next day was her birthday and another just mocked her.

"Why do you have to be so mean?" the first one said. "I was just telling you it's my birthday. I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why would I have one now?"

When they all finally trooped out, Campolo writes:

I called over the fat guy behind the counter, and I asked him, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah!" he answered.

"The one right next to me, does she come here every night?"

"Yeah!" he said. "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanna know?"

"Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday," I told him. "What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?"

A cute smile slowly crossed his chubby cheeks, and he answered with measured delight, "That's great! I like it! That's a great idea!"

So the cook and his wife promised to make a cake and Tony got the decorations. The word got out and the next night by 3:15 "every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place." When Agnes came through the door everyone shouted, "Happy birthday!"

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit.

Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her. As we came to the end of our singing with "happy birthday, dear Agnes, happy birthday to you," her eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

When the cook handed her a knife to cut the cake she asked if it would be o.k. if she didn't cut it and eat it right away. She just wanted to look at it. She asked if she could take it home, a couple doors away. She said she'd be right back. He writes:

When the door closed, there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"

Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her.

When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!" (PT.com. From Tony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*)