

STORYTIME:
The One About the Dad Who Wouldn't Give Up

Luke 15:11-24

When we come to our senses, God is already waiting on us.

A sermon preached by
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Everyone loves a good prodigal son story: a sinner far from home, hitting rock bottom, a moment of conviction and repentance, a return to a loving Father. We love to see that happen.

When I was younger, I used to be sort of embarrassed that I didn't have a better conversion story. I was raised in the church; my parents were faithful Christians. I have strayed from the path, but not very far. I am a sinner in the need of grace and forgiveness, but I never had the destructive, rock-bottom, dramatic kind of conversion that makes a much better story on the revival circuit. As I got older, I became more and more thankful for that.

When I was in college, there was a major evangelistic event in Conway, Arkansas. The primary evangelist was James Robison, and they held the revival in the arena at UCA. One night the guest speaker was Richard Penniman, also known as Little Richard, one of the pioneers of rock and roll. Between his times of musical popularity, Little Richard would preach revivals. Being both a student of American Christianity and rock and roll, I had to go see this sight. Several of us religion majors, future Methodist preachers from Hendrix College, went to the revival that night.

When it came Little Richard's time to preach, he did it the same way he played rock and roll—with energy, drama, and style. For about half an hour, he told the congregation in far too graphic detail how as a famous musician he had committed all the sins of the flesh imaginable. The moms in the audience who had brought their children to the church meeting that night were visibly squirming. But at the end, Little Richard shared for five minutes how he had seen the errors of his ways and had come back to Jesus. I was unconvinced as to which life he enjoyed more.

The good news of the grace and forgiveness of God is like a diamond. When you go to buy a diamond, they put it on a black cloth so the brilliance of the stone can be seen with clarity. Sometimes it's good to hear the Gospel against the backdrop of our radical brokenness in order to appreciate its beauty. The diamond in this parable is God's love seen in the father who welcomed his son back home, but we see it clearly because the son was so lost.

The love we see in the father is gracious. He allows his son to take the inheritance early. When the son comes home, he responds with extravagant love—shoes for his feet, a robe for his back, a ring for his finger, restoring the son to the wealth of the family. Forgiveness is lavished on the one who was lost. That’s how the love of God works.

The love we see in the father is patient. Week after week, month after month, year after year, the father never gave up. He kept watching for his son to return. God never loses hope in you. No matter how far, no matter how long we have been lost, God waits for us to come home.

The love of God we see in the father is sacrificial. He gives his son a third of his property—while he is still using it! God loves us so much he gives Jesus to die on the cross to cover our sins. God makes the sacrifice so that when we do come to our senses, we can return to God’s loving arms.

This love we see in the father is unconditional. The son can’t do anything to stop it, to change it, or to block it. God loves us no matter what. As Paul wrote to the Romans, “*nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”¹

In many ways, this parable is like the first two parables in Luke 15, which we looked at last week. In all three parables, something is lost: a sheep, a coin, a son (actually two sons, but we’re going to talk about the older son next week). Somebody seeks what is lost: the shepherd leaves 99 sheep to go find one; the woman sweeps the house until she finds the coin; the father never gives up on his son. And when the lost is found, there is joy and celebration: The shepherd and the woman call together their friends and family to celebrate; the father throws a party with the fatted calf. All three point to the divine joy when even one sinner repents and turns to God: “*there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*”²

This story hinges on a Jewish law that gives the firstborn son 2/3 of the inheritance from the father. The younger son would have claim on only 1/3 of the inheritance, which usually came after the father’s death. But the younger son asked his living father to give him his share now. It was a highly selfish and disrespectful request, but the father did it. Most wealth

in that time was tied up in the land, so this probably means that the father sold a third of his land to accommodate the younger son.

The son took the money and went away. He quickly spent his wealth on a lifestyle that the various translations call “wild, loose, riotous, dissolute, or extravagant.”³ You can imagine. About the time the money ran out, there was a famine in the land. At the end of his rope, the Jewish boy got a job feeding the pigs on a farm; the Jewish Law said anyone who feed pigs is cursed. He got so low he considered joining the pigs in their slop, munching on the tough, fibrous pods of the carob plant.⁴

Finally the son came to his senses, or some translations say he came to himself. This is significant because Jesus is saying that deep down, we know what’s right. At the core of our being is a capacity for God. Our truest self is in a right relationship with our Father.

So the son repented of his stupidity and sin. He got his speech together and started toward home. He wasn’t going to ask to get back in the family or even to be a slave, because slaves were considered connected to the family. He just wanted to be like a hired hand, a day laborer on his father’s place.

But while he was still some distance from home, his father saw him and came running to greet him. This shows the extravagant love of the father, because men in the Biblical world did not run. It was considered undignified. But here comes Papa, barreling down the road. He grabbed up his son in a huge embrace. The son couldn’t even get his prepared statement said before the father was calling to the servants, “Get the best robe—my own! Bring the family ring. Put shoes on his feet; he is not a slave. He’s my son! Kill the fatted calf (Meat was a rarity.); let’s have a big party! My son was dead and is alive again. He was lost, but now he is found!” “*And they began to celebrate.*”⁵ Are there any more joyful words in Scripture?

The parable of the prodigal son (or sons) or “the one about the dad who wouldn’t give up” has been called the greatest short story every written.⁶ It hits the bulls-eye on the human condition. The predicament of the younger son and the reality of God’s unconditional love is as real and relevant as today’s newspaper.

One modern-day prodigal is named Billy Neal Moore. Billy Moore grew up in a poor family in a rough neighborhood somewhere in Ohio. By the time he was a teenager, he was involved in all kinds of petty theft, breaking and entering, and dealing dope. He joined the Army to get away from all that, but his bad habits went with him. He got married, but his wife got involved with a drug dealer. He got divorced, but she got his military paychecks. So Billy wound up with no money, a three-year-old boy, living in a dumpy little trailer with no furniture down in Georgia.

One night Billy was drinking and smoking dope with a friend of his, and the friend was telling him about an old man in the area who was rumored to keep his life savings stuffed in his mattress. Billy asked, “Is he some big, tough guy?”

“Nah,” his friend said. “He couldn’t hurt a fly.”

So Billy hatched a plot. He went home, got his pistol, and went straight to the old man’s house. He broke in and began ransacking the place.

The old man woke up to hear somebody crashing around in his house, so he got his shotgun out, and when Billy burst through his bedroom door with a gun in his hand, the old man pointed his shotgun and fired. The buckshot missed him completely, but Billy responded by shooting into the darkness. When he turned on the light, he saw the old man, Fredger Stapleton, lying dead on the floor. Billy Moore ransacked the bedroom, grabbed the shotgun, and ran home.

It didn’t take long for the police to track Billy down. Within a few hours he was sitting in a jail cell, charged with capital murder. He confessed to the crime, was convicted, and was sentenced to die in the electric chair.

Billy’s aunt, however, was a Christian, and she knew of a couple—a pastor and his wife—that had a ministry in the Georgia prisons. So she called and asked them to visit her nephew on death row. They went to Billy and said, “Jesus is willing to give you a fresh start and a new chance at life.”

Billy couldn’t believe them. Didn’t they know who he was? Didn’t they know where he was? He had killed an old man in cold blood and was given the death penalty. He told the couple, “My life is over. You don’t understand. There are no new beginnings for me.”

The pastor responded, “No, *you* don’t understand. Jesus Christ loves you so much he wants to find a way to make your life count.”

Billy not only heard what the couple said, he also saw Jesus in them. He said later, “Nobody ever told me that Jesus loved me. Nobody had ever told me that Jesus died for me. It was a love I could feel. It was a love I wanted. It was a love I needed.”

So Billy Moore knelt with that couple in the prison visiting room and told God he was sorry for what he had done, and he asked God to save his soul and even to make the rest of his life count for something. The Christian couple asked permission to use the bathtub on death row, and they put Billy in it and baptized him right there. At that moment, God began to change that convicted murderer from the inside out.

It was sixteen years before the criminal justice system got around to taking care of Billy. For sixteen years he was living in a cage, waiting to die, but in that time he became a model prisoner. The guards nicknamed him “the peacemaker.” He led Bible studies on death row and counseled with the other inmates and prayed with them. Many of them found hope in the last days of their lives because of Billy.

But finally, on August 22, 1990, Billy Moore was scheduled for execution. He was put in the death watch cell, and he talked with his lawyers for the last time. Billy was concerned because they were so upset, and he offered to pray with them. Billy was not upset; he knew that the Jesus who had forgiven his sins was going to take care of him when he closed his eyes for the last time in the electric chair. On the outside, many people who had heard Billy’s story were asking that his life be spared. His supporters included Rev. Jesse Jackson, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and the family of Fred Stapleton, the man he had killed.

Seven and a half hours before Billy Moore was supposed to die, the Georgia Pardon and Parole Board met and did something that was unprecedented in American history. They decided to throw out the death penalty for this model prisoner. Then, in a move so unusual it made the front page of the *New York Times* the next day, they set the wheels in motion to release Billy Moore from prison. He was released in 1991. It was the

first time a confessed killer on death row had not only been spared, but had been set free.

That's grace. That's the Prodigal Son all over again. It wasn't the prison rehabilitation system that gave him the second chance. It wasn't a self-help program or transcendental meditation or psychological counseling that changed his life. It was just one thing that turned his life around. Billy says, "I will tell you plain and simple. It was Jesus Christ. He changed me in ways I could never have changed myself. He gave me a reason to live. He helped me do the right thing for a change. He gave me a heart for other people. And he saved my soul."⁷

Since then, Billy Moore has been a speaker around the world, a pastor of a Pentecostal church, and an advocate for the abolition of the death penalty. Often he will speak in prisons about the forgiveness he got when he came home to God.

Not all of us have the dramatic story that Billy Moore does; not all of us are prodigals to that extent. But there is a little of the younger son in all of us, and there is a lot of the older brother in most of us. We will turn to his part of the story next week.

The point of the parable for us today is that we are invited to experience the radical, transformational love of God. Whatever far country you are in—sin, addiction, conflict, troubled marriage, depression, anxiety, illness, grief (There are all kinds of ways to be lost.)—whatever far country you are in, you can come home. God's love is gracious; God forgives you and welcomes you no matter what you have done. God's love is patient; God will never give up on you, and it is never too late to come to your senses. God's love is sacrificial; God has made a way home for you by the blood of God's Son on the cross. God's love is unconditional. There is nothing you can ever do to make God stop loving you.

So come home today. Come home for real. Come home for good. Come home, for the love of God. Come home.

¹ Romans 8:39.

² Luke 15:10.

³ Luke 15:13, NIV, NASB, KJV, NRSV, CEB respectively.

⁴ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation Commentary: Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 187.

⁵ Luke 15:24.

⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke: Daily Study Bible*, Rev. Ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975.), 204.

⁷ Lee Strobel, “Meet The Jesus I Know,” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 211. Cf.

<https://www.ajc.com/news/forgiven/gIU0aa1p6wZHQsfxk2wiBL/> and

<https://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/22/us/a-day-short-of-death-a-georgia-killer-is-given-life.html>.