

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of life anew and renewed, we walk into your house with humility. We seek to devote our lives to you and to your purposes, even when we shirk from this responsibility more often than we would like. Yet, you receive us time and again with the graciousness of a loving father receiving a long-lost son.

God, we turn to this magnificent but multi-layered story of the father and two sons. We identify with each of them at different points in our lives. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that we will be the ones who take our resources and the gifts you so lovingly give us and use them for selfish and destructive ends. Sometimes that will be the money and items we have; other times, it will be time, it will be relationships, it will be other things we all too easily take for granted. We will mess up, as we have before. Walk with us, gracious God, through our successes, through our mountaintops, and through our valleys, our failures. You bless us when we give ourselves the grace we need and when we are harder on ourselves than we deserve. The walk of faithfulness, you remind us, is not a sprint to soundness right away, but a journey through the times when we are not at our best to discover what it means to be at our best. Sometimes we need to mess up to find faithfulness. Guide us in trust and support, that these truths may become known in their time and place. May it all be so in the name of Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

True confessions: I am a perfectionist. I always want to do things the right way the first time. I get angry with myself when I perceive that I fail, so I try to do pretty much everything right. Sometimes I do; often I don't. In this way, culture loves me because we buy into its formula for success, hook, line and sinker. I run in the rat race of success,

which essentially means not failing...no matter what. I'm quickly learning that this is not a strength; this is easily a weakness. It prevents us from being fully human, for not always succeeding is an absolutely unavoidable part of life and something we need to make peace with in order to be faithful humans and Christians. How do we learn anything at all unless we don't always do things right the first time? Life is framed all too often about success at any cost that to fail is considered nothing less than becoming a second rate person. We see the failure of a boy who literally wastes his life possessions away foolishly. When he decides to repent and return home, his family faces a choice: judgment of his decisions, which would add on to the shame he already feels, or the grace to respond with love.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once called this story the best story in the Bible. Most interpretations want to focus on unconditional forgiveness as the main take-away. Indeed, the father is often interpreted to be like God, forgiving us with graciousness that we cannot measure. That is definitely true, but there are also other ways to interpret this deep story. I believe our day in age in particular gives us a unique interpretation that gives us grace to respond to failure lovingly and in context of what it means.

First of all, how do we title this parable by Jesus? There is no one definitive name in scripture. We often call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and by naming it that way, we see that we focus upon the sin of the son. How we title it all depends on which character you wish to focus upon. The greatest emphasis has been on the young son, how he went away, haughty in desiring his inheritance, and squandering it all on riotous living. We may call it the story of the Father, who not only allows his son to prematurely take his inheritance but then receives him with the greatest joy upon his return home. It may be the story of the brother, who highly questions his father's judgment in receiving the selfish

son so easily back into the fold. Who do you identify with in this story, and how do you title it? I see myself in the image of the two sons. Some times, I am the older son who recognizes how much work and time I have put into something only to have another person come in and steal the glory. Other times, I see myself in the young son who has cocky predeterminations and becomes reckless. Both of these are absolutely human, as we will be the cocky one and the unhappy one at various points in our lives. One usually gets the approval while the other is judged deeply. That may not necessarily be fair. Today, I want to call it the Parable of the Son who Messes Up. No question, his sin is troublesome and shameful, but those errors did not lead him to deeper sin; they lead him toward reorientation toward what is good and right. He messes up and becomes a better person for it. I believe we need to mess up in order to learn what we need to learn throughout life, for success at all times is not necessarily the best thing.

There are interpretations of this text that cover the gamut. Some lift up the older brother as the righteous one and the younger son to be highly at fault and suspicious over his reasons for returning. There are some that consider the father to be too graceful, needing to put more judgment on the son who wasted his inheritance. Indeed, that might seem appropriate, as the son virtually told the father, "you are dead to me." He took the father's hard-earned things and used them on things that were considered highly unfaithful. Indeed, the actions of the younger son are not to be lauded. It's a moot point to ask whether what he did was good or bad. What can come out of this conversation is what it means to have the child come back home and the father to receive him with open arms.

To be fair, this story is far overblown. This never would have happened in the ancient world, nor would it happen today. We wouldn't allow kids to ask for their

inheritance prematurely, and we wouldn't give an inheritance before we were gone without a pretty good reason...most notably because we might still need it. I think most parents who loved their children would reprove them strongly after leaving like that and coming back empty-handed before jumping to embrace them. We do not know what the father was thinking and how he saw everything, but he jumped to greet his son anew with love and forgiveness. Is this undeserved? Definitely. Should he have given his son more of a talking-to? Possibly.

If we look at the example of the father, we might interpret that this is easy grace. Paul asks in Romans if we should sin as much as possible so that grace may abound all the more, and the example of the father seems like the answer would be yes. But Paul says, "By no means!" Grace is there for our benefit, but we do not call upon grace to the point of abuse. We are called to live a life of faithfulness, but what this story can teach us is that it takes something to learn what faithfulness means to us. It can often take a big catastrophic failure in the moment to discover who we truly are and who we are meant to be. It was a selfish and ungrateful boy that left the home, but it was a more mature man who returned and asked for nothing but a humble place as a hired hand. Whether you have been in the position of the father or the son, I'm sure you've known what it means to mess up in one way or another. Sometimes it's big; other times, it's something that may not be so big, but in any case, we often take any mess-up very seriously.

One of the problems in today's culture is that we have no space to fail. In some professions and responsibilities, there should be no space to fail. You wouldn't want your physician to suddenly decide that messing up is a good idea to do regularly. It's just unfortunate that somehow we took on that all of life has the same high stakes as life and

death. Internally, we often give ourselves no grace when we do not live up to the standards we set, whether they be large or small scale. That may be because the pressures on the outside do not give us the space to fail either. The pressures can usually be implicit. This story can serve as the antidote for so many parents of this day. Parents who were never allowed to learn a lesson often visit those standards upon children, taught in the strictest terms that they cannot and should not fail. It can go to the greatest extremes. I've heard stories of parents raising their young boys from obscenely young ages to become the most technically sound football players, especially the quarterbacks always in the limelight and under criticism. These parents have a plan for their children so that they could succeed in high school, get a scholarship to the most prestigious football colleges, get drafted in the first round of the NFL Draft, win Super Bowls, and...what? Find a fulfilling lifestyle? No. This is imposing the wishes of the parents for an unfulfilled life on the child, who finds no space for fulfillment. When there is no space to fail, there is no space to learn; there is no space to become a better person. "Failure is not an option," is the famous phrase from Apollo 13, but most of our efforts do not have life-and-death consequences. On the other hand, we have the example of this father. Is the strength of this father that he lets his child fail, only to come back as a more realistic, mature, and prepared man?

The father says at the end of the parable, "this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." In a way, this is very true; the son had to go out and die a kind of death to foolishness and childish ways before he could come back renewed and ready to face life maturely. He learned some hard lessons, but maybe he had to do it his own way. Part of love is recognizing how to most faithfully teach the lessons that others need to know. I'm not advocating blowing vast amounts of inheritance, but

there is wisdom in allowing failure. It can be really hard to do; who wants to see a loved one fail? At the same time, the most formative times in life are when we go through the darkness and come through the other side a different and more complete person because of it. It can be that mistakes allow us to die a kind of death, to ignorance, to selfishness, to fear, and free us for joyful life and service in a new life. God walks with us on that journey to become the best we can be, providing support, guidance, and companionship. We will never be alone on that walk, even when it feels most like it.

All in all, we need to mess up. Life is not about coming out of the womb and having it all right. It's about learning what is right and good by not always doing it perfectly the first time. And before you, you have example A of someone who needs to let go of that great and powerful illusion that our mission on earth is to have it right the first time around. It's just not possible, and it puts unfortunate pressure on all of us to be something we are not. New life requires a death, not a transition from good life to better life. The one we call the prodigal son had to die a certain death before he could attain new life. How will we respond when we don't make it exactly as we wish? Will we turn into hatred and judgment, or will we accept the fact that perfection is not attainable in our lives? Indeed, each mistake we make leads us toward growth in the future. Amen and Amen.