

**+ Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 + Journey to the Cross: A Father's Embrace +
+ 4th Sunday in Lent + 14 March 2010 +**

"A picture is worth a thousand words." Tucked away in a photo album or shoebox or on your computer's hard drive, I'm sure you'd find a picture that could tell a whole story about that moment captured in time.

This morning Jesus shows an old, beat-up photo just like that. In that weathered photograph, somewhere on a dusty road that leads to a family's country home, an aging, weary father embraces a son with all his might. The son can't even look his dad in the face. Tears stream down their cheeks. Servants run out of the picture to carry out some hasty order, while some distance away an older brother looks on with contempt. It seems ordinary, because loving fathers show love for their children, but there's something extraordinary about that **FATHER'S EMBRACE** that makes us pause on this **JOURNEY TO THE CROSS**.

Two young men had grown up in a stable home. Their father loved them both very dearly. He provided all they needed and so much more. The father was a successful landowner, who had also raised his sons to worship the true God. Godly order and discipline prevailed, yet from servant to son, everyone enjoyed the generous kindness of that loving father.

Still the younger son wanted "freedom" away from the watchful eye of dear, old dad. The longer he stayed, the more he wanted to get away until one day he made a very rude request. **"Father, give me my share of the estate."** Under Jewish law, a father could divide his estate before he died, but that was very unusual. Really the younger son was telling his dad to drop dead. It was a loveless request and it cut his father to the core.

The father couldn't demand his son's love, **"so he divided his property between them."** Both sons received their portion of the inheritance—the older receiving 2/3 and the younger 1/3. Even worse, the young man not only cut ties with his father, but soon left nothing behind as he **"...got together all he had [and] set off for a distant country...."**

The young man was finally free of his father's "unreasonable" discipline. Once he reached the distant country, the young man abandoned himself to his so-called freedom, but he was a careless fool. He threw his money around and squandered every last penny. He lived wildly with friends only money could buy and indulged in disgusting acts. In thinking he had found freedom, the young man found himself a slave to guilt and emptiness.

Pretty soon his pockets were as empty as his heart. His "friends" were gone. Then a severe famine struck. As prices for the most basic food items skyrocketed, the young man went broke. **"He began to be in need"**. Too proud to go back to his father, he stayed, but soon became desperate. He could either starve to death or find work, so he **"hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs."**

For a Jew, herding swine was as bad as it could get. Pigs were unclean and so were their handlers. The longer the young man tended them, the greater his guilty shame grew. Soon his hunger got so bad he longed to eat the carob pods the pigs were eating, **"but no one gave him anything."**

The young man's rebellion against his loving father made no sense at all. Finally he **"came to his senses."** He remembered how his father had even showered kindness on his hired men, while in shameful filth he was **"starving to death"**. The young man realized he had rejected his father's love and had foolishly thrown away his happiness for nothing. He realized he had sinned not just against his father, but God himself. He didn't deserve to be called a "son", but hoped he could convince his father to take him back as a hired hand. **"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men."** He started for home wondering what he would find.

The miles passed quickly. As he practiced his line yet again, the young man suddenly heard muffled shouting far off in the distance. The shouting grew louder and clearer, "My son! My son! My son has returned!" There was dad running in the distance. The young man didn't realize his father had been watching for him since the day he left. Though the son had abandoned his love for his father, the father had never stopped loving his son. That love had burned on and on day after day as he kept watch for his son. That love hurried the father's steps until he threw his arms around his filthy, disgusting son and he kissed him. Neither the smell nor all the time spent in wild living mattered to the father. Was he fool? His love for his son was just too much.

The son could barely acknowledge his sin, **"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son..."**, before his father cut him off. There would be no bargaining, no conditions, no strings attached, only the best for his son. The father ordered his servants to bring the best robe and a ring and sandals for his feet. It was time for a barbeque to celebrate his son's return.

Meanwhile out on the back forty, the older son was working hard. At the end of the day, he returned to find a party, but he didn't go in right away. He called a servant over, who told him, **"Your brother has come...and your father**

has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.” The older son **“became angry and refused to go in.”** He didn’t want to celebrate the return of this fool of a brother.

This father didn’t play favorites. He loved both of his sons so dearly that he himself went out to plead with his older son, but the young man wouldn’t listen. Such over-the-top celebration for such a sinner was ridiculous. With a sad, ugly display of cold lovelessness, the son told his father, **“Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes came home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”**

The older son was understandably bitter over the response to his foolish brother, who had wasted so much, but that didn’t make his accusations right. He blamed his father for his brother’s wild living and denied his father’s goodness in dividing the inheritance. He accused his father of being unjust, but even here we see the love of a father unlike any other. Dad responded not with anger or hurt, but love—tough love, **“My son...you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. Moreover we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”** In love, the father corrected his son and tried to win him back from his self-righteous attitude. That father had no need to justify himself, but he wanted his son to rejoice in his brother’s return.

Jesus’ doesn’t tell us the rest of the story, but we don’t need to know that. We need to know why he told this story on his way to the cross. You see, the religious leaders had accused Jesus of **“welcoming sinners and eating with them.”** The Pharisees looked down their self-righteous noses on the crowds that flocked to Jesus—tax collectors, prostitutes, **“sinners”**. These people had flocked to Jesus, not because he glossed over their sins with vague generalities or how-to solutions, but because he confronted their sinful lives with God’s holy Law and then shared with them the everlasting love of his heavenly Father. Jesus wanted them to turn from their wicked ways with his forgiveness. Many had lived in gross sin, which left them guilty and spiritually empty. They realized they deserved only God’s punishment, but because of his love, Jesus brought them real forgiveness.

Jesus’ love didn’t just move him to be concerned for those living in gross sin, but even for those who had become lost in their own self-righteousness. When they should’ve been rejoicing over all the lost sinners found and forgiven by Christ, they instead found fault with the God who pardoned every sinner freely for his own sake. Jesus also wanted them to turn from their wicked ways with his forgiveness. After all, Jesus was going to the cross for the Pharisees as much as he was for the prostitutes and tax collectors. It was that compassionate love that kept him on the road to the cross to suffer and die for gross and subtle sins, for selfishness and self-righteousness.

As you gaze on that picture of a father’s unconditional love for two “lost” sons, in those sons see how much your Savior needed to love you to save you. A person doesn’t have to publicly be a money-grabber, cheater, robber, murderer or womanizer to be estranged from God like the younger son. In fact, a person can appear very respectable, decent, honest, even Christian, while still pursuing selfish goals apart from God and the life of faith.

A person may not be as coldly loveless and outwardly self-righteous as the older son, but every time you look down on someone because they’re not like you for any reason at all, self-righteousness bubbles to the surface. It lurks in every one of us and tempts us any time we start priding ourselves on being “good Christians” unlike anyone who might be different from us. We fail to see that such smug self-righteousness only separates us from our gracious God and makes us as lost as anyone in gross sin.

The harsh reality of God’s holy Law makes us realize that apart from Christ, we are eternally lost. For willful rebellion against our loving Father, we deserve only his wrath and punishment, but our God is eager and willing to forgive even sinners like us, whether ours is an extreme case of waywardness or one that few detect. Our Savior Jesus embraces us with his forgiveness and covers our filthy sins with a robe of his righteousness purchased with his blood on the cross. It was Christ’s love for you that kept him going to the cross and it was his love that found you and made you his son or daughter through faith in him. God and all of heaven still endlessly rejoice over the repentance of every sinner—even you and me. At the same time, when the Savior shows the same grace to anyone else, it moves us to rejoice in that extraordinary, unconditional love of our God for every soul.

As we begin the final ascent to Jerusalem, don’t forget the Father’s embrace. Every hug comes to an end, but not that one. He loves you. He gave up everything for you. He puts himself where you are in the dirt and filth of life and lifts you up to be his son or daughter. You are his own dear child and he will never let you go. Amen.