



**Trinity UMC Iron Mountain March 27, 2022**  
**Rev. Geri Hamlen**  
**Baptism for Arlo Stephen Hayes**

Our reading this a.m. is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible—The Prodigal Son, the Compassionate Father, the grumpy older brother. Novels have been based on this story line. Songs have been written. Movies and TV series have been made with this basic theme in mind...Steady older sibling. Wild and crazy younger child who wanders off. The Father figure's reaction to it all. Tough love, or compassion, or cut off for shaming the family name. It's a cultural reference point even. We all bring our own pre-conceived notions to this story.

So this a.m. I am going to ask you to listen to it with fresh ears. Let's consider the perspective of the audience who heard it first those many centuries ago. On this particular day in the life of Jesus...there was a crowd around him which included tax collectors—cordially hated by everyone. The visible Sinners—publicly known for their wrong-doing. And the Pharisees & scribes—good, respectable, up-standing members of the community—sometimes called the invisible Sinners because you don't get to see what they've done wrong. And yes...there is tension between the 2 groups...

So try to put yourself in different shoes. Imagine, if you will, listening to Jesus maybe from the standpoint of the known and visible sinners. OR

Imagine if you prefer, that you are in the up-standing, socially acceptable group, with sins in your closet that no one knows about.

Try to hear with different ears...and we'll compare notes after we hear the story yet again.

**Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32**

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So Jesus told them this parable:*

*"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.*

*“When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”*

*“So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’*

*“But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.*

*“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then the elder son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’*

*“Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”*

A Word of God that is still speaking,  
**Thanks be to God.**

### **Thoughts about an Imperfect Life and Faith—Sermon**

‘We often believe we are the problem...’

How do the up-standing people hear this story?

- Father in the time of Jesus were responsible for maintaining the honor of the family. This wealthy father was an up-standing member of the community. Responsible for maintaining standards and providing an important cog in the economic structure of the community. Yes, he had deviated from social norms but giving his younger son his inheritance early but that was forgivable as long as the estate kept running smoothly and the older son maintained the proper respect and demeanor.
- Of course, to the upright in the audience, the downfall of the younger son was no surprise. The wages of sin are dereliction, deprivation.
- The father’s generosity at the return of the younger man may have been a surprise to the up-standing people listening until they heard that he was going to be honored and celebrated for returning. Upright people would perhaps have chewed on that for a minute and then figured: What the Father did from compassion was to restore the family system to what it was before the early division of his estate. Family values were affirmed. The ‘right way’ of doing things was re-established. The social order was more secure. The estate would continue and all was well...just like nothing had ever happened.

- The older brother...well, the Pharisees and scribes, and the righteous synagogue goers knew the traditions of their faith—the older brother often gets the short end of the stick. Cain was the older brother but God favored his younger, Abel. Ishmael was Abraham's oldest son but it was the younger boy, Isaac who inherited the blessing of God's promises. Esau was the older brother but it was Jacob who weaseled him out of his blessing. The up-right people hearing this for the first time would have thought perhaps...suck it up big brother. This is the way it is. Deal with it.

What about the tax collectors and the publicly acknowledged sinners? How would they hear this story?

- From the first two sentences, they would know that Jesus was talking about a wealthy, well-placed family. Just the fact that there was enough assets to generate an inheritance would have told them that this is a story about the rich and famous. And...oh my goodness, by the end of the story, they hear and notice that there are not only hired hands at this family compound—there are also slaves...a whole other and even lower level of the economic system.
- The younger son...well maybe he was someone they had partied with. As that son descended the ladder of respectability, he would have hung out with different social groups that his father and brother would probably have totally avoided, like the people that Jesus was hanging out with.
- Those who know themselves as 'outside' of acceptable society, may hear this story with a touch of cynicism—poor little rich boy going home to Daddy. And they may have questioned his sincerity. But they probably respected his strategy. I don't know if any of us can fully understand the basic survival instinct that kicks in when people are hungry, day after day after day. And we haven't had to develop the ingenuity and savvy to finagle food or shelter or transportation from those who have enough to spare but may not be inclined to share.
- They may have noticed that the younger son didn't offer to become a slave. No, even at his most desperate, he figured being a hired hand was as low as he needed to go.
- They may have wondered...where's the Mom? Why isn't she part of this story?
- And they may have questioned the seeming compassion of the Father. Because the older brother hadn't received any compassion or generosity from dear old Dad. The elder bro worked like a slave—even though the inheritance was supposedly divided between the two brothers, Dad kept a tight handle on the purse strings and wasn't about to share even a young goat for his eldest to party appropriately with his friends.
- Was the Father's compassion for the youngest truly compassion or just a huge relief that he was finally going to come home and behave himself so that the family name could be redeemed? If compassion and generosity are dependent on huge and tragic events to manifest...are they really what they seem?
- And at the end of the day...how long would the younger brother stick to the script and behave himself? Was he truly changed or just looking for 3 hots and a cot?

Jesus doesn't answer all those questions, does he? He seems to want the sinners and the upright...and us.... to chew on this story, in bite-sized chunks. This is a family story with troubles enough to go around for everyone...Everyone in this story has something to feel bad about, right? Just like us. We all have troubles and this beloved story invites us, each time we hear it, to question our social location. To wonder about our motivation for compassion and generosity. To consider what it means to have so much when there are sinners and slaves and lost and ignored people all around us standing in need of solutions and support for their problems.

This is a story that begs us to ask ourselves: Am I good enough? Am I caring enough? Am I sorry enough for what I've done wrong? Really, really sorry? Am I the problem or...can I somehow contribute anything worthwhile to this crazy, mixed up, messed up world?

Our delusions of a perfectible life keep us disappointed in ourselves and thinking that we aren't good enough. Yes, We can be pretty hard on ourselves when things don't go as planned.

When our families don't live up to our expectations.

When we fail to meet the standards that maybe our families require of us.

Guilt, shame, and fear of being seen as a failure can leave us wallowing in a world of hurt that may be just as much self-inflicted...more so than externally imposed.

So ask yourself this: Can you show yourself the compassion and kindness that you would give to a friend? Do you believe that the grace and mercy of God extends to you and your troubles? Are you willing to ask God to help you through the hard times rather than just toughing it out all by yourself? Did Jesus come to save you from yourself?

Let me assure you...rather than blaming ourselves for everything, Jesus wants us to open our minds, to hear with new ears. Wherever we are in our lives, whatever problems we have, whatever trouble is stalking us—Jesus is walking right beside us.

Offering us respite and refreshment and courage to keep putting one foot in front of the other as we receive, gratefully, whatever courage and compassion and generosity God offers us in whatever situation we find ourselves. We are good enough for this moment, for this circumstance, for this life we have been given.

Let us pray...

