

"A Son Restored"

Paul calls it reconciliation. I like to think of it as restoration. Restoring something is amazing. It might be a car, or a boat, or furniture, or even artwork? It is absolutely incredible to look at 'before' and 'after' pictures and see the transformation of the restoration.

Any time there is a restoration there are two parts: removing the past – the old, which could be the effect of non-use, use, or abuse, neglect, and time, and then restoring it to like new – where 'the impression of what has been' is no longer visible. The old is now able to be what it had been before!

If you think about it - Jesus Christ is in the restoration business. He can take shattered dreams and breathe life back into them – restoring them once again into dreams filled with vision, hope, and future. Jesus can remove the tarnish, the blemish and whatever is covering up what was great and makes it real and new again! To be in a relationship with Jesus Christ means that your life is truly restored.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus tells His followers a parable about a man who thought that life without his father would be better than life with his father. This is often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son; however, you could almost call it the Parable of the Loving Father. Sadly, there are some, who, for whatever reason, have tried to live their life without God. It is not important whether it is just for a moment, a day, a month, a year, years, or a certain season of your life – but it is long enough to have learned that something is not right – life is not working out like you planned.

This rich and wonderful parable of today's Gospel has 3 main characters that most of us can relate to the Father as God; the Son that ran away – often called the Prodigal – could be you and me; and then there's the son that stayed and gets mad at the Restoration – that also might be you or me! This entire parable – both parts of it – is about restoration and love.

The youngest son, that ran away, takes his inheritance, and leaves home. He took the money and ran. Since he was the younger son, he was entitled to one-third of the estate – but not until the death of his father. We really don't know why he wanted the money or why he wanted to leave – but he did, despite the shame and heartache that it brought to his father, his family, and to himself. By his taking the money – he was declaring his father dead – and taking the property and money all for himself.

He wasted his entire inheritance on partying. He blew it all and was left with nothing! The Gospel tells us he went to another country. The country where he was living was struck with a severe famine – leaving him penniless, destitute; he was desperately in need. The money and the blessings that this young man squandered were possible only because of his relationship with the father. The life that he had led before demanding his inheritance was all because of his

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relationship with his dad. When it all ran out, he was left with nothing, especially his father, since he had abandoned that relationship by demanding his portion of the estate. When he did that, the relationship with the Father came to an end and this son set out relying on other things and not on the love of his father, and so he felt the consequences of not being with Him. You know the old saying “You reap what you sow!”

While seeking pleasure and fortune, this young son ended up being far away from home. Whatever country he lived in couldn't be Jews because they raised pigs. He was a poor, outcast foreigner who was so far from his father. He was at the point where even whatever the pigs were eating looked good to him. He could not have been receiving a decent wage, because he was having to eat with the pigs!

His dreams are gone, poof - like a mist or vapor. You could say that he had gone from palace to pigpen, and he hit rock bottom! While he was at the bottom – he realized "I've sinned!" He realized that his sin cost him more than he ever could have imagined. The Gospel tells us that he came to his senses, that he longed to be made “*as a servant,*” willing to take the lowest place and even do the nastiest work. He now longed for home, and as he walked back toward home, when the father saw his son coming – he ran to meet and greet him. Not the son, but the father!

Jesus tells us that happened next in today's Gospel: (Luke 15:20-24) “*So he got up and went to his father. 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. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. 'But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'* So they began to celebrate.”

No elderly Jewish man would ever run, but his love for his son took priority over dignity. Thinking of the normal clothing of the day, the father would have had to pull up his “skirt” to run. Just picture a grown man trying to run-in floor-length robes?

In the blink of an eye – he was restored! What happened next is remarkable. The best robe in the house that belonged to the father himself – would be signifying the return to his place of honor. And then there is the ring which was probably a family signet ring and it became a symbol of reinstatement to sonship in his father's household. Slaves did not normally wear sandals, but they carried and tied a master's sandals. With this the father is saying, “No, I won't receive you back as a servant. I am receiving you as my son.”

While he hoped for reconciliation with his father, he could not have imagined a full restoration of his previous relationship. The father's actions spoke more loudly and clearly than any words possibly could have. All of the tarnish on Him, the dirt from living and eating among pigs, the

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shame and the guilt was washed off him and removed. Immediately – His dreams were restored. He once again had a hope and a future. The past was removed and the future lay ahead of him. He had come full circle - from the pigpen to the palace! He had experienced restoration in full! His dreams were restored, dreams that were lost while living a life of sin. His hope was also restored, and his relationship with his father was restored.

The beautiful robe, the ring, and the festive banquet symbolize the new life -- pure, worthy, and joyful -- of anyone who returns to God, and that is the way that God the Father is with sinners. He will accept you as you are – with the stuff from your pigpen all over you, but He loves you too much to leave you that way! God will call for a celebration; He will put His robe of righteousness on you; He will give His ring of royalty to you; and He will give you sandals of freedom from condemnation. All a sinner has to do is come home today – to repent and come back to the Father.

But that is not the end of the story – there is the eldest son’s harsh reaction to his prodigal brother’s return and to the lavish party his joyful father threw. The father who had been wronged forgave. But this eldest son was unforgiving, filled with contempt and pride. His resentment leads to isolation and estrangement from the community of forgiven sinners.

In this parable Jesus gives us a vivid picture of the character of God and what God is truly like. God is kinder than we could ever be. He does not lose hope or give up when we go astray. He rejoices – all of heaven rejoices, in finding the lost and in leading them home. What a sharp contrast between the Father and the older brother who came home from working in the field and heard what was happening, and got angry. The older brother is a perfect example of the attitudes of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law in Jesus’ day. They had the same attitude toward the sinners as the older son had toward the younger son. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law were angry with the message Jesus was proclaiming. They did not like the idea that people from outside their people group – outside the Israelites, including outcasts and sinners, were to be a part of God’s kingdom. Like the older son who refused to go to the feast, the Pharisees refused to enter the kingdom that Jesus offered to the nation of Israel.

The father told the older son that he had the joy of being in the house all the time, and now he should rejoice with the father in his brother’s return. The words that he spoke, “*You are always with me and everything I have is yours,*” suggest to the religious leaders’ that they were the recipients and guardians of the covenants and the Law (see Romans 3:1-2; 9:4). Rather than feeling angry, they should rejoice that others were joining them and would be a part of the Kingdom of God.

And finally, in this parable Jesus showed - the power of forgiveness, the danger of self-righteousness and of judging others, and the richness and humility that comes with repentance – all because of the love, compassion and mercy of God who really cares for you – unconditionally, enough to come running to you – by sending His Son to take your place. I

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don't look at this as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but I ask you to think of this as the Parable of the Loving Father, ready to restore all who will turn back to Him.