

Sermon on the Parable of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32

By Jim Vitale

Think back with me on the last time you apologized to someone. And I mean *really* apologized for something serious, not for just neglecting to hold the door open, checking your phone in the middle of a conversation, or bumping into someone. I'm talking about a time when you apologized for something that seemed unforgiveable. Do you remember how you felt in the moments leading up to that confession? Heart pounding, knees weak, stomach churning. Hold that moment in your mind.

Repentance is terrifyingly vulnerable, and as pastor John helped us understand last week, it is something we all must do. It is a plea to the one we have harmed to welcome us back, knowing full well that we do not deserve it. It is true vulnerability because in that moment we purposefully open ourselves up to rejection. The one we hurt can choose either to embrace us in love or send us away in sorrow. And when we are the repentant party, we must honor the desires of the one we have wronged, even if their decision is to reject us.

Befitting of this season of Lent, today we hear another of Jesus' parables which is all about repentance. In this story, a son demands his inheritance from his father, which is the material equivalent of saying "I wish you were dead!" Having amputated himself from his father, he "squanders all his inheritance on dissolute living." I'll let you decide what that means.

But quickly the fun is over and the money is gone, death draws near—famine strikes and the son suffers, famished. In the face of his own death, he regrets his poor choices and realizes that the only course left to him is repentance, returning to the one he wronged, knowing full well that he deserves only rejection. Yet despite this reality he wanders back to his father anyway, hoping that he will be received even if only as a slave.

In his repentance, the son experiences vulnerable hope. Having wasted all his possessions, he has nothing left to him but hope: hope that his father will acknowledge him, hope that his father will welcome him back and not reject him, hope that their relationship can be renewed.

So it is with each of us when we wound someone. Repentance leaves us in limbo as we await the judgment of the one we hurt. We would find it perfectly understandable for the father to reject his son after everything that happened. But instead the father acts unexpectedly. As the son approaches his father's town, rehearsing his pitiful speech, preparing to enslave himself to his own Dad, the father makes his first loving move.

The English translation we read today unfortunately gives us a watered down version of what the father did. Our culture does not favor the kind of emotional father-son behavior that takes place here, and that disposition is reflected in our translation. We might expect some kind of macho, Bruce Willis-, James Caan-, Marlon Brando-style greeting: a hand shake, a mumbled "welcome home," maybe some meaningful eye-contact, but not too much. You know really "manly" stuff. But that's not what we get at all. Rather, we get authentic, vulnerable emotion, a father-son intimacy that is nothing short of the love of God.

It starts as the father sees his son coming from a long way off. It's almost as if the father was sitting there, staring at the horizon, longing for his son to return. Who knows. Whatever the case, the image of his son appears on that horizon, and the father responds.

We read that the father is “filled with compassion,” but there’s more to it. The Greek word here contains the word for “entrails.” In the first century people believed compassion and pity came from the intestines. And so the father is not just filled with compassion, he is moved to a compassion so deep that he can feel it deep in his gut; quite literally a stomach-churning love.

That visceral compassion compels the old man to sprint all the way out of town to meet his distant son. In those days countries would send delegations to meet dignitaries outside the city and escort them back in, a symbol of respect and hospitality. In a small way, the father does this for his son, welcoming him back to town not with shame, but with honor. The father’s sprinting foreshadows the royal ring, robe, and repast the son receives a couple verses later.

After sprinting to greet his wayward son, we hear that the father “puts his arms around” and “kisses” his son. This image makes me think of a stereotypical French greeting: you smile, put your hands on the other person’s shoulders, draw them in for a light kiss on each cheek—a gently physical, non-confrontational interaction. But that is far from what happens here. In this case, the father literally falls upon the son’s neck. The father has built up his momentum and he uses it to his advantage, falling upon his son with loving force. And he does not give a simple peck on the cheek, rather he offers repeated, frantic, dare we say “intimate” kisses.

The whole thing is a lot messier than our translation reveals. This one giant emotional outburst transpires so quickly that the son doesn’t even have a chance to vocalize his repentance. Because for the father, the mere fact that his son chose to come home is enough for him. No words, no excuses, no speeches can augment or offset the father’s joy in regaining what he lost.

Indeed the son is not saved by his confession. He is saved by his father’s willingness to run to him, to wrap him in his arms, and say to him, “I love you.”

In truth there is no way for us to know how the people we’ve hurt will respond to our acts of repentance. They may decide to reject us, but this parable shows us *exactly* how *God* greets us when we repent. God the father does not respond with rejection or some solemn embrace, but with an intimate, frantic compassion. In the wayward son’s repentance and indeed in our own repentance, we put ourselves back into God’s hands, a terrifyingly vulnerable act of hope.

But unlike the wayward son who had no idea how his father would respond to him, as Christians we experience more than just vulnerable hope. Because when God sent his son Jesus to die on the cross, God *promised* not to leave us lost in the exile of broken relationships. Through Jesus we now know how God promises to respond to us, and it is that promise which turns our hope into trust. So in our repentance we experience vulnerable trust: trust that God will acknowledge us, trust that God will welcome us back rather than reject us, trust that our relationship can be renewed.

So may you trust that when you repentantly approach God, pleading forgiveness, before you can even get the words out of your mouth, our God is already feeling a visceral compassion, sprinting out to find you, falling upon your neck, and kissing you over and over again.