

The God Who Runs Out on the Road To Meet Us

Sermon by John Strommen on Luke 15:11-32 Oct. 1, 2017

Philip Yancey, in the book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, tells the story of a friend of his who works with the down-and-out population in Chicago. A prostitute had come to him for help. She was in wretched straights, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her 2 year old daughter, and she suffered from chemical addiction to boot. In her pleas for help were also heart rending confessions of desperate compromises she had made in her life and as a mother. Yancey's friend could hardly bear to hear this story. Eventually, he asked her if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. The man wrote, "I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face." "Church?" She cried. "Why would I ever go there? I already feel terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

Nor is this woman alone. In my 30 years as a pastor, I've heard the same refrain many times, whether it's on account of divorce, addiction, trouble with the law, what have you. "I can't go back to church. Not after what's happened." Why is that? Too much shame, too much judgment. For whatever reasons, the Christian church is often seen as a place not where healing and restoration happen, but where raised and furrowed eyebrows happen.

I know, some might say, "Well, people are mistakenly assuming that we're not here for broken people, but we are." The truth is, if people aren't picking up that message, it's on us. Yancey wonders, "What has happened to our churches where people feel this way? When Jesus walked the earth, the individuals who were the most desperate and messed up *sought out* Jesus, they didn't run away from him. Why? Because he loved them. He didn't lecture them about how bad they were. They already knew that!"

It raises the question: what is our core value, our main message as Christians? Is it grace or is it judgment? Are we a public hospital for broken lives or a private club for the worthy?

What does the sculpture of Jesus up here tell us about our main message at Mt Carmel? Do his outstretched arms induce shame or bring hope?

Our Bible story today tells the story of a young man who brought incredible shame upon himself and was anything but worthy. But ultimately, this story tells us who God is.

We know the story well. What we don't know, perhaps, is what this story originally meant in Jesus' culture where he told the story. The younger son asked for his portion of the inheritance so that he could go off and do whatever he wanted to do. Now, in this culture, if there are two sons, the firstborn is entitled to double the portion of the inheritance, so, in this case, two thirds. The younger son, then, is asking for the value of one third of the father's estate. And the father complies.

Here is what is particularly eye-opening and shameful about this according to this culture:

1. Normally, inheritance is given upon the death of the father. If an inheritance was given before the father's death, it was always initiated by the father as his gift to give. A son asking for it prematurely is akin to saying to your dad, "I wish you were dead."

2. In this culture, there were no assisted living facilities, so aging parents depended upon their children to take care of them in their old age. The younger son has just declared that he intends to shirk his duty to care for his aging parents. It will then be up to the older son to carry the entire burden.
3. Even more than this, the son has rejected family and community, not only by leaving, but by taking his father's hard earned assets prematurely, making his own family far less prosperous and more vulnerable.
4. Finally, the son went to a faraway land and squandered the inheritance on reckless living. It is assumed that all kinds of moral compromises were a part of this, bringing shame to a Jew called to live according to the Law of Moses.

So, in this culture, a father would be ashamed to have raised such a son. Neighbors in this community would despise a son and who brought such dishonor to his family and community, and perhaps feel the same way about the father who granted him the request.

Eventually, the younger son spent his money and was no longer living large, but desperately hanging on, working the worst jobs in lonely obscurity. He comes to the realization that he had it pretty good back home, but has squandered his right to even be called a son. Maybe he could go back home as a servant. At least he would have a bed, some food, and belong somewhere. So he heads for home, fearful no doubt for what the outcome would be.

It says that the father was watching, waiting for him, and when he saw his son approaching, he was filled with compassion and ran out to greet his son, hugging and kissing him. The son said to him that he had sinned and was no longer worthy to be called his son.

The father's response? To throw a party for him as an honored guest! As the father exclaimed, "this son of mine who was dead is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

In this culture, there were rituals towns had for sons like this and it was no party. Were it up to the town to decide, had neighbors or representatives of the town seen the son first, they may have declared and conducted a ceremony banning the younger son from this community for life. Symbolically breaking a clay jar, townspeople would pronounce that, like the broken jar, so too is the man's connection to our community broken – now and always!

But the father got to him first. It says he was watching and waiting, and then he ran to meet his son. In this culture, a man of advanced years with grown sons did not run. It was not dignified. But I think we know why he ran. He wanted compassion and forgiveness to reach his son before judgment did. And so it did, and the prodigal son - the would-be broken jar - was made whole. He still belonged.

But did the prodigal son *deserve* the father's affection? Shouldn't the father have read him the riot act before he considered accepting him back or lectured him to make sure he knew what a screw up he was? The prodigal son doesn't warrant this kind of love and forgiveness. He's unworthy. And yet, his worth to this father was almost unlimited! This sort of love is reckless and maybe irresponsible!

There is a big difference between *worthiness* and *worth*. We think we must be worthy to receive good things, to deserve what we receive. Then we are in control, self-sufficient, not reliant on others. So, in our world, our worth and value must be proven. Even if we don't do something horrendous like squander our family inheritance, the world is a cruel judge. "How do you justify taking up time and space?" the world asks us. "What are you worth, financially?" "I'll bet I have more Facebook friends than you do." In this world, our worth is tenuous, at best, and the result is shame, the feeling that I'm not good enough.

With God, our worth is not achieved, it is *given*. In fact, to God, your worth, your value is not up for grabs; it is virtually infinite because God loves you. Jesus told us the story of the prodigal son because the father in the story shows us the heart of God, a God who is about compassion more than judgment, acceptance more than banishment. The prodigal son felt ashamed and worthless, and yet he was worth everything to his father.

And so, like the father running out to greet his son and shield him from judgment, so too does God send Jesus to embrace us and shield us from judgment. Just as the father gave up his dignity to run and greet his son, so too does God "empty himself and take the form of a servant" in order to be with us and love us through Jesus. We are not so different from the prodigal son, you and I. We all squander what has been given to us. We have fallen short in the worthiness department. And yet our value is off the charts, we are worth so much.

Martin Luther's most famous contribution to Christian thought is this: *we are justified by grace through faith*. Justified means "to be made right with God," to be made whole. Since there are no conditions we must meet to receive this gift, it is an *unconditional* gift from God. Just trust it, as surely as the prodigal son trusted his father's love as he ran to him and hugged him. Only a love like this can set us free from ourselves and the forces that would crush us. Only a love like this can set us free to truly love our neighbor.

How do we extend this good news to our neighbors? How do we make sure the predominant message with us that everyone sees and feels unmistakably is that the God who made us runs out to meet us on our difficult journey with the gift of life? How do we make sure that (the sculpture) is who we are in word and deed? Amen.