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### A Man Had Two Sons

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on March 26, 1995, the fourth Sunday in Lent. Scripture Lessons: Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

When I read the story of the Prodigal Son, ~~do you know what I think of?~~  
~~think of God.~~ I think of what God is like. The most important character in this story isn't the prodigal son. It isn't the older brother. The most important character in this story is the father. I want to direct your attention to just one verse - verse 20: "But while he (the prodigal) was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."

"While he was still a far way off his father saw him and was filled with compassion." ~~What Jesus is saying is this: God is like the father of the Prodigal Son. God welcomes tax collectors and sinners. God welcomes prodigal sons and daughters.~~ God sees us while we're still a far way off. God has compassion on us. *Can we hear it so much.* I think this is something that we've all heard before.<sup>1</sup> We know it in our head. But how can we experience God's welcoming love? How can we have some understanding of what it means for God to love us in this way? *while we are still far away.*

Sometimes writers - secular writers - can help us understand the Bible better than Biblical scholars. One story that reminds me of the parable of the prodigal son is a story by Norman Maclean. A River Runs Through It. When I was preparing this sermon I read lots of Biblical commentaries. I read what Biblical scholars have written about the parable of the prodigal son. They gave me a lot of historical background about the parable but nothing really clicked for me. Then I

thought of the father in A River Runs Through It.

Did you see the movie? I saw the movie. Then I read the book. I also heard an interview with Norman Maclean on the Public Broadcast System. The story is autobiographical. Maclean was one of two sons. His father was a Presbyterian Minister - a Scot's Presbyterian living in Montana in the early 1920s and 30s. His brother, Paul, was the prodigal son. He got into drinking as a young man. Drinking, back in the days of prohibition. A lot of people drank back during prohibition. But Paul drank too much. A shot of whiskey after breakfast. A work break at 10 for Scotch. Paul was an alcoholic. He couldn't admit his problem. He also got into gambling as a young man. He got addicted to gambling as well as to alcohol. He got caught up in the gambling crowd. A tough, mean crowd of people. He ran up all kinds of gambling debts. He couldn't pay them off. One May morning the police sergeant awakened Norman at daybreak to tell him that Paul had been found dead. He'd been beaten to death by the butt of a revolver and his body dumped in an alley. Norman returned home to tell his mom and dad.

The news was not altogether surprising. His father could see how Paul was ruining his life. <sup>He saw his son drinking --- gambling --- he knew he couldn't imprison his adult son. He saw how he was far away & loved him.</sup> His heart went out to his son. He prayed for him. He loved him.

He never rejected him. But Paul's death crushed his father. His father never walked very well again. He had to struggle to lift his feet, and, when he did get them up, they came down slightly out of control. Once his father asked Norman, "Do you think I could have helped him?"

When I think of the anguish of Paul's father I think of the father in the

A father who gives his son freedom to go away...  
in his name... Do you think's any way 2 could have done?

parable of the prodigal son - a father who dearly loves his wayward son. The God who comes to us in Christ is like that. When we're far away from God, God our heavenly Father sees us. He sees us squander our property - the property God has given us. He sees us before we can see him. He sees us when we aren't even thinking of him. He sees us when we're still a long way off.

Listen again to verse 20: "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."

He ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Kenneth Bailey helps me understand what Jesus said. Bailey is a Presbyterian minister. He's also a

Biblical Scholar. He lived for many years in Palestine. He knows Palestinian culture. He speaks Arabic fluently. He has a first hand knowledge of Palestinian

culture. This is what Bailey says about this verse. He says that the word 'run' in

Greek is the technical word used for the footraces in the stadium. His father saw him and had compassion and raced. This is not just a slow shuffle or a fast walk -

he paces! A man of his age and position always walks in a slow, dignified fashion.

<sup>Palestinian</sup> No villager over the age of 30 ever runs. But the father <sup>paces</sup> races down the road. He

has to take the front edge of his robes in his hand like a teenager. When he does

this, his undergarments show. Bailey can't imagine any Palestinian father he's

ever known acting like this. This is terribly undignified. Terribly humiliating for

any self-respecting Palestinian father. The father voluntarily throws away his

dignity. He freely allows himself to face humiliation. His compassion leads the

father to race out to his son.

This is what God in Christ has done for us. God does not stay up in heaven, far away, aloof, distant. God has come to us in Christ. God has come racing to us in Jesus Christ. God humbled himself and came to us in Jesus Christ to embrace <sup>one of the stumbling blocks ... how could any sacrifice possibly that got himself crucified. If God could find any other way to forgive we would ...</sup> us. It costs God to forgive. God doesn't just declare our sins forgiven. God can't simply declare our sins forgiven. Forgiveness has a price. Forgiveness always has a price. You know that forgiveness has a price if you have ever forgiven anybody. The only way God can forgive us is to come to us in Christ. The only way God can forgive us and reconcile us to himself is humble himself and suffer. He takes upon himself our shame and suffering.

When I think of the father of the prodigal son I think of another story. I think of a story that Alan Paton wrote. Cry, the Beloved Country. The setting is South Africa. Cry, the Beloved Country is a beautiful and tragic story of racial unrest. It also tells the story of a father, the reverend Stephen Kumalo, a Zulu clergyman. He has a son. His name is Absalom. The last time Kumalo saw Absalom he was walking away from his village <sup>like the Prodigal Son</sup> headed for the bright lights of Johannesburg.

<sup>After not hearing from his son for a long while</sup> Kumalo emptied his meager savings and went <sup>to Johannesburg</sup> looking for his son. He searched everywhere. Each place he goes adds to his fears. The boy had been involved in stealing, in drinking, and worse. He eventually found Absalom in prison. Absalom had robbed and killed a white man. Broken hearted, the old man talked with his son. Kumalo wept for his son. At the trial, Absalom was found guilty. He was sentenced to death. When the day came for Absalom's execution,

Kumalo cried out for his son. He cried too for his land and his people.

When I think of Cry, the Beloved Country - when I think of Stephen Kumalo - I think of the father of the prodigal son - the father who ran and put his arms around his son and kissed him. And I think of Jesus. The father of the prodigal son has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. We are the prodigal son whom God in Christ has come to reconcile to himself. The suffering of Jesus on the cross is not just the suffering of a good man. It's not just the suffering of a great prophet. The suffering of Jesus on the cross is the suffering of God. It's the suffering of the father for his prodigal sons and daughters.

"In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." *From the Cross ... we hear God speaking to us ... whether to us in Jerusalem.* Be reconciled to God who comes

Let us pray: God of compassion, you are slow to anger, and full of mercy, welcoming sinners who return to you with penitent hearts. Receive in your loving embrace all who come home to you. Seat them at your bountiful table of grace, that, with all your children, they may feast with delight on all that satisfies the hungry heart. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.