

Prodigal Love
John 15: 11-24

One of the songs I remember singing as a brand new Christian is one by Ralph Carmichael that had become very popular among young people. It would be considered as breaking ground for the new contemporary style of worship that we experience today. The song was entitled, "He's Everything to Me," and was all about living with complete trust in God.

In the stars His handiwork I see,
On the wind He speaks with majesty.
Though He ruleth over land and sea,
What is that to me?
Till by faith I met Him face to face,
And I felt the wonder of His grace,
Then I knew that He was more than
Just a God who didn't care
That lived away out there.
And now He walks beside me day by day,
Ever watching o'er me lest I stray,
Helping me to find the narrow way,
He's everything to me.

I was standing with about 1,200 college students from around the Southeast at a Christian conference and I remember being so moved and touched by the moment as the words we were singing affirmed my own longing to have God be everything to me. It was just a month earlier I had been with my fraternity at a weekend party, one in which I spent the weekend not remembering my weekend, which was typical for me at that time. Now here I was, a month later, just a day after making a total and complete commitment to Jesus Christ singing with 1200 other Christians, "He's everything to me." This past week as I was reflecting on the parable we are looking at today, I found myself

thinking about that day and how I was once lost, but now I am found, that I once was blind, but now I see.

For a large part of ministry I struggled with why people struggle in making this decision of giving their life to Jesus Christ. I turned that question over and over as I had served one church after another. I have seen the people in every congregation struggle with this decision as some make that commitment but sadly many do not. Church growth specialists have determined that about 20% of the people in every church have made a complete and total commitment to Jesus Christ. That means about 80% in the church go through life with a divided heart. It means 80% of those who make up every congregation cannot sing "He's Everything to Me" without some type of guilt because they know it is not true. Jesus is NOT everything to them. So I wrestled with why? Why do people find it hard to make a commitment of their life to Jesus Christ?

It was not long ago that I found my answer. I was on a planning retreat with my staff team at the church I was serving and we were singing old campfire songs such as "Kum Ba Yah" and "Pass it On". We then sang this same song, "He's Everything to Me," and when we finished I asked that question to the staff team, "Why do people have so much trouble making that commitment, why do people have trouble saying with their hearts that He is everything to them? The Director of the Children's Ministry responded with the answer I had been looking for. She simply, but for me, profoundly shared that "maybe people struggle with saying that He is everything to them because they haven't come to the realization that they mean everything to God." There lies the truth to why people struggle with this decision. I can't truly say He's everything to me until I can say and believe, "I am everything to God!"

This is the exciting truth Jesus communicated to His disciples in these three parables in Luke 15, that we mean everything to God. This is

God's heart on display. Last week we looked at the first two parables in Luke 15 and we learned that God's heart is a seeking heart. He looks for us to be in right relationship with Him. He wants to show us His strength. He wants to give us the peace that only He can give. His desire is to bless us with His joy. When we come to this third parable we learn that this story we are about to read is not so much about a prodigal son as it is about a prodigal Father whose heart is filled with prodigal love.

READ LUKE 15:11-24

For those of us who have been in church for some time have heard the story. Some of you may have heard it many times over and you know it by heart. For those of you who know the story know it by the title of the Prodigal Son. This morning I want to look at this word prodigal but from a different viewpoint. The definition of the word, "prodigal", can be used in one of two ways;

1. Spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant. It is based on this understanding that we can call the story, the prodigal son because we see him as being wastefully extravagant; as spending resources freely and recklessly.
2. Having or giving something on a lavish scale. Synonyms would be; Generous, lavish, liberal, bounteous, unsparring

When Jesus raises the curtain on this story the spotlight falls, not on the two sons, but the father. The father is the main character. As we saw last week, the main character in the parables represents God, and more specifically, his heart. The purposes of the parables is to help humanity understand God's heart and what His heart is like.

When Jesus refers to God in this story as "father" and by doing so he immediately telling us, right off the bat, that God is personable, that He is not distant. It is a title that should bring up feelings of belonging, acceptance, trust and compassionate love and caring. In the story I am

struck by the fact the father must have created an atmosphere that had these feelings and emotions as the foundation of the home. Why else would his son be able to come to him ask his father for his inheritance? There was no fear, no anxiousness in the voice of the son.

And that is exactly what happened. No scolding, no anger, no warnings, no rejection. The father loves his son and therefore gives his child the free will to choose. The father does what love does and lets the son go. Free will. Freedom to choose. Love does that. Was there pain in that release? You better believe there was pain! I can easily imagine the gut reaching pain the father must have felt seeing his son pick up his inheritance and walk out the door. The father knew his son was not mature enough, not ready enough to handle his inheritance. The pain this father felt must have been overwhelming as he watched his son walk down the road to a life that would be far, far less than what the son could have experienced if had stayed home.

I wonder if the son knew that he was breaking his father's heart. Now, to answer this question we had better be careful, very careful in how we answer. A better question to be asked is this; "Do we know when WE are breaking God's heart? The reason we need to be careful is that the son in this story is you and me. I think about the times I have turned my back on God, on the times I have resisted His will for my life; I think about every time I broke ranks with Him and walked my own road, a road that was separate from the road He was walking. I think about the times I have rejected his guidance and replaced his love and grace with my own selfish desires. Sadly there are countless number of men, women, youth who have seized this inheritance called life, of his magnificent creation, and packed it all up and have left the Father with the understanding that they will never return.

And we go out in to the far country, a place where we have separated ourselves from God. It is not a geographical place. The far country is a

condition of our soul. It is a place where we have separated ourselves from God. Hear me on this; such a separation usually doesn't happen overnight. In fact, the journey into the far country can be a slow walk, a slow journey. Little things that enter in can begin to pull us away and down the road toward the far country; little things such as something said here and there.

-A half- truth, a bit of gossip, a little action over here that is wrong, and we know it is wrong. We overlook the consequences of the action, we may even try and validate the action as being needed.

-But as we begin this slide into the far country we notice that there are even bigger things that we want and to attain them we will need to alter our plans and our lifestyle that would be more suitable in the far country rather than in our father's house.

-We know that we have truly entered the far country when we no longer feel at home in prayer and it begins to disappear from our lives.

--Reading the Bible is a chore so we jettison it.

-The desire to be in worship with our brothers and sisters begins to evaporate. We feel uncomfortable there.

-Eventually the far country becomes a place of rebellion and that rebellion will take from us everything that was once dear in our lives; a marriage, a family that once was solid and strong. Happiness is replaced with anger or depression. There is very little joy or peace. Eventually what you have in the far country is the exact opposite of what we once had as we lived in the house of our father.

It is here that the story makes an abrupt change. Jesus tells us that the "boy came to himself." This means he saw himself as he really was. My friends in AA call this as taking a personal inventory. You begin to see yourself as you really are. Sadly there are many people who choose to stay in the far country because they don't want to take an inventory. They don't want to see themselves as they really are. It is too painful they say. They don't want to think of the people they have hurt. They don't want to examine their attitudes, their actions, their thought

patterns, their character, and how it has changed. It is too painful they say. To do as Jesus said this father's son did, "to come to himself," means that we will have to tear down all the defense mechanisms we have erected and come to the point this young man did and say to ourselves, "I must return to the father. I must come back home. I must say to my father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight." We call this repentance. Thomas Wolfe, the noted author, once said, "You can never go home again." I beg to differ when it comes to our relationship with God. When it comes to our heavenly Father, we can always come home again. Always!

It is when we finally come to our senses and we begin to make the journey home, that is where we discover the beauty of prodigal love and what God's love is all about. I love the picture Jesus gives us of the heart of our heavenly Father. What a beautiful portrait he paints of God's heart. The father, with His heart full of prodigal love for his son, has been waiting, watching, longing for his return. Every day, all through the night, the father has been watching the road. Finally, finally the moment he had been anxiously waiting for, hoping for with all of his heart, arrives as he sees the distant figure of his son coming down the road. What follows is beautiful. It brings tears to my eyes when I think of what is about to happen. The father sees him, and he takes off running down the road toward his son. Prodigal love gives wings to the father's feet. He can't run fast enough! His legs will not match what he is feeling in his heart. Yet he runs with reckless abandon because prodigal love is driving him forward.

He reaches out to his son. He embraces him. He gives him the kiss of restoration. He places the family ring upon his son's finger signifying that the restoration has been made complete. The best robe was placed upon him and sandals were placed on his feet. But it doesn't end here. Everyone must share in the Father's joy. The household is rounded up. The neighbors are invited and a great celebration breaks loose and the

father shouts the reason why, "My son was dead and has come to life again; he was lost but he has been found." That, my dear brothers and sisters, is prodigal love!

Have you ever been embraced and kissed by God? I have and sad and happy at the same time, have been done so by God many times. Every time I deserved it least and needed it most. Every time I resisted God's will. Every time I allowed my selfish desires to take charge and I said to myself, "This is wrong. I must return to my Heavenly Father. The moment I felt that desire in my heart God has rushed to me, picked me up in his strong, loving arms, and I have felt that prodigal love rushing into my heart and I say, sometimes with tears in my eyes, "thank you, thank you for welcoming me back. Thank you for allowing me to come back home."

Again, I ask you, have you ever been embraced and kissed by God? Have you ever experienced the prodigal love of God in your heart and life? His love is prodigal. Look at Jesus and you see love with no limits. It is unrestrained. It is lavish. There are no boundaries to His love. God's love is defined by Golgotha where lavish, reckless, excessive, extravagant love is painfully shown. Even though He knew the world would respond to His love with rejection, violence, hatred, apathy, He still loved, and He still loves, and He always will. That is what prodigal love does. That is how much we mean to Him. We mean everything to God. The question now is, what does He mean to you? How much does he mean to you? You mean everything to Him. Does He mean everything to you? If He does, then come home, come home.