

“God Moves... Down the Road”

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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Let me begin with a word, repent. **Repent. What’s your reaction?** When you hear the word repent, what feelings come to you? **Fear, judgment, guilt, or perhaps joy, renewal, rebirth?** If you’re like most people, it’s probably the first set of words. The call to repent, to repentance, is difficult for most of us to hear but it is a major theme of the season of Lent. This is a season of reflection and repentance as we journey to the cross with Jesus. So let’s spend some time this morning on repentance perhaps to think of it in ways we may have never before.

The text from Luke’s gospel that Steve read begins with Jesus hanging around with people. His fame was growing and people flocked to him, all sorts of people, tax collectors and sinners among them. This did not endear Jesus to the religious gate keepers, the Pharisees and the scribes. Eugene Peterson’s Message translation puts it this way; **they growled, “He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.”** We’ll get back to the Pharisees and the scribes later, but Jesus responds to them by telling them a parable. Actually Jesus tells three parables, but we will focus on the third one this morning.

You know it well, it’s the parable of the prodigal son. More accurately, it’s the parable of the two sons, or the parable of the prodigal father. **Prodigal means wasteful and who is actually wasteful and why depends on your perspective.** This parable is so well known that you wouldn’t ever have to step foot in a church to know of it. It’s part of our collective culture. I’ve already touched on most of it with the kids but let me revisit a few key points. A man had two sons. The younger asked his father for his share of the property that would eventually belong to him. He couldn’t wait. **This wasn’t a simple request.** The father couldn’t just go to the bank and take out a million dollars and give it to his younger son. The inheritance was in the property. To give his son what he wanted, the father would have to divide the property and sell it. He would have to liquidate the land that was such a part of Jewish identity. And so he does. But the son’s request for his share isn’t just about getting his money. The usual way sons received their share of the property was once the father had died. In this case, the son can’t wait. He’s impatient and he’s imprudent. **I can’t wait until you’re dead, old man, just give me my share now!** It’s basically him wishing his dad were dead.

It’s amazing that the father would do what his son asks, but this father isn’t just any ordinary father and what he does is just the first of many things that would label him as wasteful in the eyes of many. The son goes off to a distant country and squanders his property in dissolute living. You can imagine all the things a young man far from home with lots of money might do to waste it, and he probably did all those things and more.

Then one day it’s all gone, the money and the friends. He’s hungry, he’s in need, he’s desperate. **Then, the text says that he came to his himself, he came to his senses, he came up with a plan.** I’ll go home. I’ll tell my father that I have sinned against heaven and against him. I’ll ask to be treated like one of his hired hands, not as his son. I’ll work to make amends. And so he makes his way home, prepared to pay the price for his foolishness.

The father sees his son while the son was still far off. I wonder whether it’s a coincidence that the father saw the son that day, I think not. I think that the father looked down that road every day, wondering whether this would be the day that his son would make his way back home. I think he was going down that road every day, just looking, just hoping. Then he sees him. He’s still far away, but the father knows his son and he runs to

him. This is shocking behaviour for an older man. Older men don't run. They don't hike up their robes to expose their legs and run like a young man or a child might. It's undignified, but this father doesn't care, he is filled with compassion and he runs to his son, put his arms around him and kissed him.

The son gets out a few of the words he must have rehearsed so many times, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But before he can continue, before he gets to the part where he can say **what he will do** to make up for what he has done, the father interrupts. Quick, get a robe, the best one, and get a ring and get some sandals for his feet. And get that fatted calf we've been saving for a special occasion and get it ready for a feast. **We're going to eat and celebrate for my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found!** The younger son doesn't even get to say what he was going to say. He doesn't get to tell his father how he will try to make up for what he has done, how he will try to redeem himself. It's not needed, and I doubt that his father would have accepted it. This father has other plans, he wants to have a party.

But not everyone's happy about the return of the prodigal. The older son, when he hears what's happening, that his younger brother has returned and that his father has killed the fatted calf for him, he's angry and he won't come in to join the party. **And maybe he's got a right to be angry.** After all, his younger brother has already spent his inheritance. His father already gave it to him. Whatever's being spent on the younger brother now, whether the feast, the fatted calf, and whatever future resources will be needed to care for this scoundrel, **all of it will now come from the older son's portion of the inheritance, from his property.**

No wonder he's upset. I've done everything you've asked, working like a slave for you, but you've never given me even a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours comes back, you give him everything! But the older son forgets that all he will inherit belongs to his father first. He thinks he's justified in his anger, but the older son is just as lost as the younger one. **He never leaves home but still manages to be lost.**

Both sons are in need of repentance. The father could have waited until the younger son pleaded his case, begged for mercy for his stupidity and arrogance. He could have made him work like a servant, humiliated him as a lesson to be learned. He could have forced the issue with the older son, told him to get his butt into the party now. I don't care what you feel, you're going to make an effort, or else. **But the father, this father, isn't what people might expect of a father in this situation.** He is wasteful, prodigal, in his love, in his grace, his mercy and his compassion. Instead of staying inside at the party, he goes out, he leaves the table, to find his older son. It's embarrassing to have **another** son who just won't honour his father, but he doesn't care. He goes out and tells his older boy that he loves him, son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. He pleads with his older son. Fathers don't plead, they pronounce, they proclaim. He could have punished his son, but instead he pleads with him.

And that's where it ends. The parable ends with the father out in the field with his older son, pleading with him to come to the party. We have an unfinished story, there's no resolution, and that's the beauty of this parable, that's the power of this parable. **And the heart of this parable is the issue of repentance, namely, whether repentance will take place or not.**

Both sons are shown mercy by the father. Both are forgiven for their humiliation of their father. They don't deserve it, neither can justify it. Both have offended their father's honour. The father could have waited, demanded contrition, obedience, repentance. **But for this father that's not how repentance works and that's not how it works for our heavenly Father as well.** Think about it. Most of us believe that if you want to be forgiven you need to repent. If you want absolution, pay for your offenses. If you do the crime, you pay the

time. But not for this father. He forgives his younger son even before his son can say that he deserves to be treated like a servant, not a son. He forgives his older son who dishonours his father by not joining the party, forcing his father to come out to him. **For this father forgiveness isn't contingent upon the repentance of his sons. He forgives them before either of them can repent of their actions.**

So repentance isn't about what we can do so that God might forgive us. It's something different.

Remember that the Pharisees and the scribes were horrified that Jesus was hanging around and eating with tax collectors and sinners? These people were the worst of the worst. Righteous people were to have nothing to do with people like that. But Jesus was breaking bread with them. And he was doing it even before the tax collectors and sinners could make amends for what they had done. Jesus was inviting them into his company, his circle, he was saying they were loved before they could do anything that might make them deserving of that love, before they could repent.

Repentance doesn't lead to forgiveness. Repentance is a response to forgiveness. Which is why the parable is unfinished. What will the younger son do with the forgiveness he's received? Now that his stomach is full, now that he's back in the family again, now that his father has already forgiven him, will he make that forgiveness real in his life by repenting? It won't be easy. You don't change the way you're wired overnight. How long before he gets into trouble the next time? Will he truly repent by changing his ways? And what about the older son? Will he repent now that the father has come out to him and told him that all that's his will be his son's? Will he change his ways now that his father has pleaded with him and not forced him? Will he become less jealous, less angry, less judgmental, someone he's never been before because he's experienced his father's forgiveness?

We don't know. We don't know what the older son will do, whether he'll go into the party. We don't know what the younger son will do, whether he will truly change his ways. We are unsure of both sons. **The only person we are sure of is the father.** He is truly prodigal, wasteful, in his mercy, in his grace, in his forgiveness and in his love.

Like the two sons in the parable, like the tax collectors and the sinners that Jesus ate with, we too have been offered forgiveness through the act of Jesus on the cross. In his dying and in his resurrection, in his defeating the powers of darkness and death, Jesus has freed us and forgiven us from our sin. **But will we repent, will we respond to that forgiveness by accepting it and truly turning from our old ways to new ones?**

Repentance often strikes fear into us when we hear the word because we misunderstand it. Repentance isn't about falling on our knees and begging God to forgive us. It's not about being afraid that if we don't get it right, we will be punished. It's not about turn or burn. **But it is hard, it is very hard.** But when we do repent, when we are convicted to respond to the forgiveness of God and do something with it, we will find that it becomes a source of joy and renewal. **But it is hard and let me tell you why.**

Repentance is about doing something different. The word repent means to turn, to follow a different path than the one we're on. And that's not easy. Human beings are almost universally predisposed to remain the way we are. **Change is hard.** Our natural resistance to change is incredibly strong. To change takes effort, sometimes painful effort. When change is all in our head, when it's merely an idea, a hope, but not grounded in actual action, consistent action, it won't happen.

Chip Conley was a very successful man at an early age. He made a fortune in the hospitality industry but by his late 40's he was burned out and restless. "I didn't want to do it anymore, I felt like I was in a prison," he said.

So he sold his company and wound up consulting for the start-up company Airbnb. He thought he was going to advise them about the hospitality industry, but instead, he wound up dispensing wisdom more than knowledge, advice about life and leadership. The executives at Airbnb called him their modern elder. Chip didn't like that, he didn't want to be called an elder, he wasn't that old. But the idea grew on him and he loved the fact that sharing what he had learned in life was creating significant value. So in 2018 Chip created the Modern Elder Academy. For a week at a time, Chip Conley brings groups of 14 -18 people to his campus for training. The average age is 53 and over 800 people have taken the program, from all walks of life. They want to learn, learn openness to new things. By the time they finish the program Chip expects that each participant must be able to answer the following questions:

- **What activities will you keep?**
- **What activities will you evolve and do differently?**
- **What activities will you let go of?**
- **What new activities will you learn?**

And further,

- **What will you commit to doing in the next week to evolve into the new you?**
- **What will you commit to doing in the next month?**
- **What will you commit to doing within six months?**
- **In a year, what will be the first fruits to appear as a result of your commitments?**

The point is that a reset isn't just about talk or thinking, **it's about doing. Repentance is about a reset, a reset with God.** It's about knowing that God has made forgiveness freely available to everyone. Jesus did it for us before we even could tell him to treat us like a hired hand. Romans 5:8 says **that God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.** God didn't wait, God knew we couldn't do it on our own, so God made forgiveness possible. **But what will we do with it, what will we do in response? Do we want to be new creations, new people?** If we do, we need to repent and it can't be just in our heads. When we know that God has forgiven us, when we know that God's love is given to us, when we know that in that love we are convicted of our sin, **what will we do about it?** If the participants in the Modern Elder Academy program can't answer the questions Chip poses, the odds are that they aren't going to be successful in their quest to reset their lives. **If in our repentance we can't identify what we're going to do differently, in the next week, the next month, in the next six months, if we don't know what it is we're going to let go of and what it is we're going to learn, we aren't likely to see any fruit of our repentance.**

Repentance is about **doing** things differently. If we want a reset with God, we need to change and that starts with doing differently, living differently. **And it will be difficult, but it will be so worth it.** In the Lent Experience bible study some of us are involved with this Lent, we are experiencing different things, new things. We are trying things we haven't done before. Some of us are fasting. Some of us are keeping solitude and silence for an hour, away from any distractions. Some of us are practicing repentance. In the weeks to come, some of us will try to meet the practical needs of another person and we're going to practice forgiving and being reconciled with someone we have sinned against.

All of this is hard, but those who have tried it have also reported that it's been amazing, that doing things differently has opened up new ways of experiencing God's presence this Lent. If you've never fasted, it's not easy to intentionally deprive yourself of food, but when you do it, not just do you can say you've done it, but to bring yourself to a posture of openness and humility before God, to be deliberately, physically aware that your hunger is to focus yourself on God, it opens new doors, new understandings, new awareness.

Those for whom repentance becomes a way of life report that the call to repent isn't something they fear, but something they embrace with joy. To repent, to follow a different path, to let go of old things and embrace new things, to commit to doing something this week, this month, in the next six months, **will** change our lives and our relationship with God and it **will** bear fruit. But we have to start doing differently.

What did the younger son do? What did the older son do? We don't know. Maybe they received their father's forgiveness and in the confidence of the love of their father, they chose to live differently, to act differently, to love differently. Or maybe they didn't. We don't know.

But we do know that we have a choice. We know that like the father in the parable, our heavenly Father is prodigal in his grace, his love, his forgiveness. It's offered to everyone, anyone. Jesus gave his life because God so loved the world, the whole world, so that anyone who believes in him will find eternal life. **In response to that love, to that grace, to that forgiveness, may we choose to repent, to live differently, to follow another path, and may we find that true repentance is truly life giving, an astonishing gift of the God who loves us, each of us.**

Thanks be to God, Amen.