

Last Sunday, we reflected on the significance of **promise**. I quoted the Pulitzer Prize winner Thornton Wilder who said to his wife, "...I married you because you gave me a promise ... and I gave you mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was **the promise** that made the marriage. When our children were growing up, it wasn't a house that protected them; and it wasn't our love that protected them. It was that promise".¹

While we have an obligation to keep, live up to promises we make, even when it is difficult to do so, God does not require us to make great promises to Him; God wants us to trust His great promises He makes to us.

In a fortnight, we embark on the 40-day period of Lent. During Advent, our focus is Jesus the Christ; during Lent, we focus on God the Father. After all, was it not God's plan that He should come as His Son and surrender Himself to death on a cross, offering His life as a ransom for our freedom from death?

Jesus' mission was to reveal the true nature of "Our Father", and He did this through the story-form of parables. The 57 parables in the Gospels help us to appreciate and understand "Our Father" as Jesus knew Him, and discover Him in our experience of daily life and in our relationships.

I think the parable which best reveals the **true** character of God is the one given in Luke 15 which we just read.

The story begins in chapter 14, "*One Sabbath, when Jesus went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching Him carefully*". Jesus was invited to the home a Pharisee to participate in the Sabbath meal which was a re-enactment of God's saving grace, delivering several million Hebrew families from slavery in Egypt.

Among the guests gathered, the the Pharisees had placed a person with a case of abnormal fluid retention in the body. *They were watching Him carefully*, waiting to see what Jesus would do, on the Sabbath. Matthew tells us, Jesus mission was to teach, preach and heal, so Jesus heals this person and sends him on his way. He probably did not want to on public even the nature of his

¹ Thornton Wilder, "The Skin of Our Teeth", quoted by William Doherty in Take Back Your Marriage, p7

health, but is glad to be healed and happy to be off. Jesus then narrates two parables, one which made the Pharisees uncomfortable, and the other made the host uncomfortable.

Then in verse 25 we read, *great crowds followed him* and Jesus taught them about the cost of following Him.

Chapter 15 opens, *Now, tax collectors and sinners were ALL drawing near to hear Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, **This man receives sinners and eats with them.***

If there is one thing I agree with Donald Trump is to abhor false news. People are crowding around Jesus, the Pharisees and other invited guests are being pushed back from the table, people are helping themselves to food at the table, so the Pharisees grumble, ***This man receives sinners and eats with them.***

Reading Luke's account, I doubt Jesus had time to eat!

Luke then gives us a very crucial piece of information to help us understand the parable about to be given. ***So, He (Jesus) told them THIS parable.*** What we are about to hear is ONE parable.

The parable starts with a shepherd who loses one out of his flock of 100 sheep. He leaves 99 sheep and goes searching for the one lost sheep. When he finds the one lost sheep, he carries it home, and throws a big party for friends and neighbours, to celebrate finding the lost sheep and returning it to the fold.

Next, Jesus mentions a woman who lost one of 10 coins she owned, who turns her house upside down until she finds it, and when she does, she too, throws a big party to celebrate with friends and neighbours, for finding the one coin which was lost in the house.

Jesus has now set up the story, to reach its final climax. Remember, all this is **ONE** parable!

"There was a man who had two sons". We know the details: the younger son asks for his share of his father's estate, takes it and takes off to a distant place

where he squanders the lot, ends up eating pig swill and finally decides to return home and plead for mercy.

The elder son returns home from a day's work on the family estate, sees a party in full swing and refuses to go in to join the celebration, telling his father, *You never, ever gave me the opportunity to celebrate like this with my friends!* He was questioning his Father's motives, *What kind of father are you? You celebrate the return of a son who squandered your wealth, yet you have **never**, ever offered me the occasion to party with my friends!*

It is easy for us to get lost in the narrative of the two sons, one who repents of his depraved life, and one who is jealous of his father's love for his degenerate brother. Some are like the younger son who realise their mistake, repent and return home and Heaven rejoices in a grand celebration; then there are those who sadly like the elder son, begrudge God for all they think He has **NOT** done for them. Like the elder son, we formulate an impression of an unfair God, who is only concerned only with the poor, the disadvantaged and the dispossessed.

This parable is not about the two colourful sons. Luke is faithful in narrating Jesus parable, and catches the word "Father", repeated 13 times in the space of 20 verses. **This parable is about the Father!**

The parable reveals the character of God. When the younger son asks for his share of the estate, the Father does not shout, get angry or argue with him. It takes the Father a significant loss of honour in society to round up one-third of the value of his estate in cash to give to his son. His peers, friends and neighbours might have said, *What kind of father are you giving into your son's demands? Teach him a lesson; rebuke and reprimand him. Don't let him get away with this, lest our sons use his example to do the same to us!*

God made us in His image; God has free will and has given us free will, to do as we wish. We may not know the repercussions of our action, and everything we do has consequences, but we will continue to enjoy free will, because we are made in God's image and He enjoys free will.

God will, therefore, not stop us when we act against Him and His laws.

Just like the single lamb who wandered off to discover a world she did not know, the Father's younger son takes his share of the estate, exercises his free will and wanders off into a world he does not really know, a world of which he might only have heard.

Like the worried and concerned shepherd who leaves the flock of 99 sheep to search the one lost, Jesus tells of the Father who stared at the horizon waiting in hope for His son's return. Then we read, *While he (the son) was still a long way off, (literally, was a small shadow on the horizon), his Father saw (recognised) him, felt compassion, and ran towards him, embraced and kissed him!*

I have read this parable so many times and completely missed an incredible detail. The father runs towards His son, without any thought whether the son is home to stay, or coming home to ask for more money, **but that is not the Father's concern**. He is ecstatic to see His younger son and eager to welcome him home.

Our Father God, is not a tyrant king who sits comfortably on His throne waiting for us to approach Him, to bow and prostrate ourselves before Him and kiss His signet ring. When God sees our change of heart, **HE is overcome with compassion, He comes running to us, embraces us and welcomes us with a kiss!**

Our Father is like the shepherd who found his ONE lost sheep; He wastes no time in rounding up Heaven's resources to celebrate the return of one lost wayward person who has repented and turned their face homeward bound.

The elder son is no saint. He is green with envy that his brother, who brought shame on the family by forcing his father to part with a third of his wealth, and squandered it, **AND** he is angry with his father. *I have slaved for you all these years and you never once offered to throw a party for me and my friends!*

Like the coin that was lost in the woman's house, the elder son is lost in his father's house; he does not how valued he is in his Father's house. Like the woman who searched every crack and crevice in the house to find the lost coin, the Father leaves the party meet his sulking son, and pleads with him and

makes every effort to get him to join the celebration, reminding him he has been, and always will be, a part of their home.

Jesus leaves the parable hanging, because He knows the mighty Pharisees in the room, understand they are lost in their Father's house. They begrudge their Father's generosity towards His repentant son who was wayward.

Let me close with this. A mother of three children went to a counsellor. In the course of the session he asked, "Which of your three children do you love the most?" She answered instantly, "I love all three of my children just the same." Her answer seemed too quick, too glib, so the counsellor probed, "Come, now! You love all three just the same?" "Yes," she affirmed, "I love all of them equally."

He replied, "But that's psychologically impossible. If you're not willing to be honest and open with me, we shall have to end this session, now."

The young woman broke down, cried a bit, and said, "All right, I do not love all three of my children the same. When one of my three children is sick, I love that child more. When one of my children is in pain, I love that child more. When one of my children is confused, I love that child more. And when one of my children is bad, really bad, I love that child more. But except for these circumstances, I love all three of my children just the same."

This parable is not about, "The Prodigal Son"; it is about "The Unconditional, Great Love of God!"

Love is the foundation of God's character; love is the core of His being. It is the love **of** God which protects, sustains and saves us, provides for us, directs us, keeps us out of harm's way, and forgives us all wrong.

This table we have just celebrated is a memorial of the love of God who sent His Son to surrender His broken body on the cross as Redeemer, who conquers death and will come again as King, fulfilling God's covenant, promise of salvation.

As we approach Lent this year, lets review and refresh our understanding of God our Father, whose love for us is so great, He went to the extraordinary length of giving His Son into death, that we might be restored to eternal life with Him.

God journeys **towards** us to welcome us and restore us into fellowship with Him, and then He journeys **with** us, homeward bound.

Will you accept Him when He goes out of His way to meet you?

AMEN.