

Before I open the Scriptures with you this morning, there's two leadership matters that I want to talk with you about.

First, I want to let you know that a two weeks ago, Alana, our worship director, asked for and was granted a 6 month leave of absence for personal reasons; Alana is planning to return to her role on Sept 1st. We will miss her! In this interim period, one of our existing worship leaders, Dayna Evanow, has agreed to take on Alana's role.

Until recently, Dayna has been one of our overseas missionaries, and she has significant experience in worship ministry and leading teams. I'm so pleased that God has provided for us in this way! If you don't know Dayna, please introduce yourself to her and be praying for her in the coming months.

Second, I want to return to the subject I have been speaking with you about over this past month, namely, the two capital projects that we are undertaking (a renovated kitchen and an upper room). Last week we asked you to bring home a pledge card, to prayerfully consider what you can commit to give to these projects, and then to fill out the card and bring it back with you this morning.

In a moment I'm going to invite our ushers to take our regular Sunday offering, and if you've brought your card with you, you can place it in the offering as it goes by. If you left your card at home, and you'd like to contribute, please pick up a card and fill it out before you leave this morning. But before we get to the offering, I want to replay a video that communicates the heart of these projects and the vision behind them. **Play Video**

At this time I'd like to invite the ushers forward to take our regular offering, and if you did bring your pledge card with you, you can place it in the offering at this time. You can also take a card with you this morning and get it back to us via email, or in hand next Sunday.

Two weeks ago I shared the story of how this church began. In 1950, a group of women in Horseshoe Bay felt the call of God to share the good news of Jesus with children in their neighbourhood. Within a few years, there were over 100 children attending the Sunday school—these leaders and children were the beginning of North Shore Alliance Church. After sharing this story two weeks ago, one of our members came up to me and said, *“I was one of the original neighbourhood children; I'm here and invested in this church today because of the faith of those godly women.”*

In 1982, a small congregation of 70 people had the vision to build the facility we worship in today, a facility that supports hundreds. Here we are, over 30 years later, 600 strong because of the faith and generosity of those 70 people. As I was sharing our history with one of our long time members, they teared up—I didn't realize that I was speaking about their own personal history. They said, *“My mom and dad were a part of those original 70, and now I get to be a part of building something that will have an impact on the North Shore for generations.”*

I believe that it's time to expand our reach and I want to invite you to join me in giving generously to these capital projects. I just received some good news on Friday—we applied for a grant from the Federal Government and they have agreed to give us \$25, 000 towards our kitchen.

Our Board would like to begin construction once the majority of the money has been pledged (or donated). Our desire is to begin construction of the upper room in late Spring, with the possibility of renovating the kitchen after our Summer Camps in late July and August.

I want to thank you for the support and encouragement we've received so far and I want to invite you to continue to be praying for us as we proceed.

And now I want to turn my attention to the sermon. This morning I want to open Luke's gospel and explore a well-known biblical story—in doing so I want to lift our eyes to the larger story of the Scriptures. When it comes to our life with God, we can become so narrow in our focus that we begin to read the Bible for information instead of for revelation.

The Bible is filled with wisdom for living, in the pages of this book we are given a number of important do's and don'ts; we ignore the Bible's instructions to our peril. But this book isn't primarily an answer book, or even a guide for living, the Bible is one of the primary means through which God has revealed Himself to the world. If you are seeking information about God, you will find food for thought in the Bible, but, information about God is a poor substitute for truly knowing Him—through this book we seek to know and encounter the Living God.

There are two primary ways to read the Scriptures: study and meditation. Many of us are familiar with the discipline of study, but fewer of us understand and engage in the discipline of meditation; both are important.

Study focuses on analyzing a passage of scripture—the goal is **understanding**. If we were to take Psalm 23 and engage in the discipline of study, we might look up every other verse in the Bible that speaks of God as being a Shepherd. We would consult biblical dictionaries, commentaries, or historical reports that outline the role of shepherds in the ancient world. Study engages the mind and leads to understanding.

When we **meditate** upon the Scriptures—what some refer to as “*sacred reading*”—we have a different goal in mind: **to hear a living word, a personal word, from God, through the Scripture**. In the case of Psalm 23, we would seek to know with our mind what it means that God is our Shepherd, and, we would seek to experience this reality with our heart.

Saint Bonaventure once wrote, “To know much [about God] and taste nothing—of what use is that?”¹ As the people of God, we seek to experience the reality of what we read. God is more than an idea to be understood, He is a Person to be encountered.

I want to begin my sermon with a question. *When you think about God, what comes to mind?* Do you think of Him as being personal or impersonal? Do you think of Him as being far off and removed, or is He close and interested in your life? Do you think of Him as being

¹ Saint Bonaventure, as quoted by Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 13.

gentle or severe? Holy or loving? *When you think about God, what comes to mind?*

Now I want to invite you to imagine God thinking about you; *what does God feel when you come to His mind?* Our answers to these questions will profoundly shape our relationship with God, and, who we are becoming. *What does God feel when you come to His mind?*

David Benner, a Christian psychologist and author, writes, “When I ask people [this question] a surprising number of people say that the first thing they assume God feels is disappointment. Others assume that God feels anger. In both cases, these people are convinced that it is their sin that first catches God’s attention.”²

Benner continues, “Think for a moment about how Christ-following develops if you assume God looks at you with disgust, disappointment, frustration or anger.” You will live your life in fear, striving to earn His approval. “Far from daring to relax in his presence, you will be diligent to perform as well as you possibly can...Surrender involves relaxing, and you must feel safe before you can relax.”³ *I wonder, do you feel safe in how God feels about you?*

At this time I want to invite you to open your Bible and turn with me to Luke 15:11-32. Likely your Bible has a heading or title above this story that reads, “The Parable of the Prodigal (Lost) Son”. From my perspective it’s a rather an unfortunate heading—it sets our minds moving in a particular direction before we even read the story. You

see, this story isn’t so much about two sons and their sin, this is story about a Father and His love.

In Luke 15:1-2, we discover that once again Jesus was spending time with people that the religious leaders had “blacklisted” for being unholy. Throughout Jesus ministry, these leaders harassed Him for the company He kept, asking, “*Jesus, why do you eat with these sinners? Surely you don’t approve of them?*”

These religious leaders made a number of crucial mistakes but none bigger than this one. They were puffed up with pride, thinking that God approved of them because they were good and righteous, and God disapproved of others—like tax collectors—because they weren’t good enough.

What these leaders failed to see was that before a holy God, no one is righteous, not even one. What they failed to understand is that God’s friendship has nothing to do with human worthiness—we’ve been invited to participate in a relationship that does not depend on our performance. We are loved because God is Love; it’s as simple as that.

To drive this point home, Jesus told them a story about a Father and His love—a story meant to shed light on our Heavenly Father, how He feels about us, and how He acts toward us. I’m going to retell this story with a few observations along the way. I suspect that you might leave this morning with some new information about God, but my

² David G. Benner, *Surrender To Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality*, 19.

³ Benner, 21.

hope is that the Holy Spirit will transform information into revelation. His desire is that we would know and experience God as our Father.

Luke 15:11-32. A certain father had two sons who helped him to run the family estate. One day the younger son came to his father, asking for his inheritance. “Father, give me the share of the property that will one day belong to me.” So the father divided his property between his two sons.

In the Ancient Near East, a son would never ask for his inheritance early; this request would have been heard in the following way: “*Father I wish you were dead so that I could have what is yours.*” Culturally, the father should have refused the request and severely punished the son; Jesus’ audience would have expected this. But in Jesus’ story had a twist, the father granted the son’s request. The father gave freely, knowing that he was opening himself to rejection.

The younger son received his inheritance, but it’s important to note that it would have come to him in the form of land. In order to convert the land into cash, a buyer was required—someone who would work the land, someone from the surrounding village. Liquidating this land would have been a very public event. Everyone in the village would have known about the son’s shameful request, and the father’s shameful granting of the request. The father and his family would have lost their honour in the community.

We’re told that the younger son travelled to a far off country and squandered his inheritance on wild living. As long as the money was flowing, he had friends galore, he was the life of the party, but when the money ran out, no one offered him a couch to crash on—he was

penniless and friendless. Eventually he found a job, feeding pigs—no self-respecting Jew would ever take a job feeding pigs; pigs were ceremonially unclean. This young son had lost a lot more than his father’s money, he had lost his friends, his family, and his honour—all that remained was the will to survive.

One day he came to his senses—the pigs were eating better than he was—and he remembered his father’s generosity; his father’s servants were well treated. *He decided to go back, but how could he return?* He had insulted his father, shamed his family, and brought dishonour to the entire village. He couldn’t take back what he had said or done, but he was slowly starving—it was time to return home.

He didn’t expect to be welcomed with open arms. As he journeyed back, the younger son began to rehearse his apology: “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.*” Culturally speaking, his self-evaluation was true; he was no longer worthy to be called a son.

As he approached the village, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him repeatedly. The son was dazed and confused—his carefully prepared apology had been interrupted by an unexpected display of love.

The son was rattled and unsure of what to do next, and so he launched into his apology, saying, ‘*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*’ **But the father didn’t seem to be listening**, instead, he was giving instruction to the servants. ‘***Quickly, bring out a robe—my best one—and put it on my son. Put my ring on his finger and my sandals on***

his feet. Kill the fattened calf, and invite the whole village—we've got something to celebrate: this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!

As the younger son returned home, word would have reached the village before he actually showed up. Likely a crowd would have gathered, serving as a kind of gauntlet for the son to endure before he ever reached his father. Perhaps this is why the father is waiting and watching for his return—perhaps this is why the father runs to embrace him; it was an act of protection. The father's public demonstration of forgiveness and mercy means that the son can enter the village—if the father has received him as a son, then he is a son indeed. *Don't we all need a Father like this?*⁴

But I've only told half of the story, remember, this is a story about a father who loved his two sons. The elder son was working in the field, but as he approached the house he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant replied, *"Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, we're celebrating his return!"* At the mention of his younger brother, the older brother's heart filled with anger; he refused to go in. And so, once more, we see the father running to embrace one of his sons. The father left the party came out and began to plead with his older son.

The older brother couldn't believe his younger brother was being given another chance. In his own thinking, the party should be thrown in his honour—he's the one who stayed, he was the responsible one, he had earned this honour. By refusing to go in, the

older brother shamed his father—culturally, his refusal was a public sign of disagreement and contempt. But once again, the father loves freely, knowing that in doing so, he is opening himself to rejection.

He pleaded with his son, saying, *"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."*

This is how the story ends—the father pleading, the older son refusing, and a party going on for a younger son that had done nothing to earn it.

When you think about God, what comes to mind? Do you think of Him as being far off and removed, or is He close and interested in your life? Do you think of Him as being gentle or severe? What do you imagine God feels when you come to His mind?

As the Incarnate One—fully God and fully human—Jesus' life clears up age-old misconceptions about God. When we look at Jesus, we behold the face of God. Jesus told this story to obliterate the myth that relationship with God depends on our performance. It doesn't.

David Benner writes, "Every time I read this story it warms my heart and settles me in God. It reminds me that far from focussing on my sins, God sees me through eyes of love. All my fears about how God will respond to me in my sin wash away as I see my Father running to meet me. Why did I stay away so long? How could I have ever thought he would let me come back as a slave? Clearly I never need

⁴ Adapted from Kenneth Bailey, *The Poet and the Peasant*.

to fear returning to him—no matter what I have done or not done—because God’s love has nothing to do with my behaviour.”⁵

Imaginative Prayer Exercise:

Jesus told this story to reveal what our Heavenly Father is really like — how He feels about us, and how He acts toward us. Jesus told this story to people who were convinced that it was their sin that first catches God’s attention. Luke 15:20 is particularly poignant, “*while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*”

My dear people, the story can either be for you information about God, or, you can experience God as your good, good Father. I want to invite each of you to close your eyes for a moment and use your imagination for the next few minutes.

I want you to imagine yourself as a younger daughter or son in this story—you’ve pushed away the Father, you’ve struck out on your own, determined to live your life apart from God. You thought going your own way would bring freedom but it’s only brought pain and loss. You’re stuck in a life you no longer want—you need God’s forgiveness and mercy and you know you have no right to ask for it.

But as you lift your eyes, you see the Father running to you—not with clenched fists, but with wide open arms. Before you even begin your apology, you are interrupted by an unexpected embrace of love.

Imagine the Father embracing you.

- *What does it feel like?*
- *What are you feeling?*
- *Is there anything He wants to say to you?*
- *Is there anything you want to say to Him?*

Over the past month I have been contemplating this central truth of the Christian faith—*God loves the world*. And if God loves the world, then we can safely assume that *God loves you and me*. What I’ve been pondering is the idea that God loves us *now*—present tense. God doesn’t love the idea of you—the person you will one day become. God doesn’t love the best version of yourself—those moments when you’re at you’re best. He loves you in this present moment—He loves the sinful, broken, rebellious person that we so often see when we look in the mirror.

This is the good news: God the Father sent God the Son to meet us where we are. And yet, when confronted with news this good, many of us are tempted to explain it away. *Jesus, if only you knew how awful I am You would reject me*. So many see themselves as the exception to God’s love—*God loves the world, but He couldn’t possibly love me*. Again, the good news is that God knows every one of us comprehensively—He knows how sinful we really are and His heart is full of love.

We have been invited to enter into the loving communion that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God’s offer of friendship has nothing to do with our worthiness—we’ve been invited to

⁵ Benner, 23.

participate in a relationship that does not depend on our performance. We are loved because God is Love; it's as simple as that.

Jesus, like the Father, is rich in mercy and generous in love. In John 15:13, Jesus said, *“There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”* In 1 John 3:16, we read, *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.”*

This morning the Father waits for you—Jesus has provided the way for your return. Like the father in the parable, Jesus ran to embrace us, enduring the cross and scorning its shame. Like the younger son in the parable, we don’t need to clean ourselves up in order to return to the Father—He fits us with a new wardrobe the moment we return. God the Father loves you, He always has, and nothing you have done, or will ever do, can change the way He feels about you. And this very good news indeed.

Prayer

Worship

Benediction

“How great is the love the Father has lavished upon us, that we should be called the children of God—and that is what we are.”⁶
May His love fill you today.

⁶ 1 John 3:1.