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Luke 15: 11-32
"Changes"

11 Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' " ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." ²²But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

25 'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" ³¹Then the father said to him, "Son,

you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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.”

What the younger son does in this story is awful. By demanding his early inheritance, he's essentially telling his father that he wished he was dead. And to add insult to his father's injury, he takes the inheritance and squanders it on parties and self-gratification. By the time he's come to his senses he's been utterly humbled – starving in a pig lot, which would have been utterly degrading place for a Jew who followed dietary laws – and dreaming of his father's servants' modest meals.

Realizing that he's hit bottom – that he has nothing to lose – he heads back home determined to apologize, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” (vv 18-19).

Have you ever found yourself in the younger son's position? You wake up one morning and feel the weight of guilt overwhelm you, and you realize how far you've strayed? Have you ever found yourself relying on the mercy of others because you've made such a mess of things that you cannot even defend your actions?

To be sure, we've all found ourselves there at one time or another. Can't we relate to the younger son?

That's why the father's actions are such good news aren't they? He sees his son coming up the driveway, looking like a wretch no doubt – battered, haggard, wearing rags – and his heart fills with compassion and he runs down the path towards him, embraces him, clothes him, restores him to the family with a ring on his finger, and throws a party for him.

In case you were wondering, the father in the story is modeling the great grace of God for us in Jesus. The love of God for us that comes when we don't deserve it. The love of God that comes for us, even when we had wished our father was dead. The love of God that comes for us when we have absolutely nothing to offer in return. The love of God that claims us even when we have

been behaving like absolute wretches. That's the love that causes God to run down the path to embrace us. It's a free gift of God's great love for us. It's undeserved. It's grace. You can't earn it. It's not merit based. It's God's nature. And it's revealed to us through Jesus, who put this love on display on the cross, pouring himself out for all of humanity.

And this IS good news. This is the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But the story doesn't end there, does it?



We know that the prodigal son came back changed, or did he? Was his coming back good news for everyone? Was his coming back good news for the elder son? And it begs the question, do we believe that people can change?

-Share video of rescue dog here-

Look what love did for that poor, abandoned, neglected, frightened dog. She became a healthy, happily adjusted part of a caring family.

Do we believe that this can work for people? Do we believe that love can take us from frightened, broken, abused, and abandoned to loved, accepted, and belonging?

Well the good news is that, first of all, we don't have to change for God to love us. God is already loving us, even when we're lost. Even when we're in the far country. Even when we've wandered from the fold of God. 1 John 4:19 says, "We love, because he first loved us." And we remember these words from Romans, "8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still

sinner, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). God has already loved us. God is already saving us from the mess we're in. Even before we are aware of the need for it.

And once we wake up to that reality, and feel ourselves embraced by the love of a Savior who has run down the path to meet us, the good work begins. Because God's love isn't content to let us be. But rather, just like the poor pup in the video, it grabs ahold of us, transforms us, and rehabilitates us into something new. We are recreated into the very image of Jesus. It's just as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5: 17).

It's a marvelous and confounding thing. It's sometimes unbelievable. It's sort of like the wee little man who was tax collector and cheat who was despised by his neighbors climbing a tree ahead of Jesus, then having him over to his house for lunch, and being transformed by the encounter to give away half of his wealth and make amends to all he had wronged. It's sort of like the testimonies we heard yesterday at the One Way Festival at Robbins Island Park where numerous men from The Fortress stood up and told their stories of how the love of Jesus had transformed them from broken and shattered men struggling with addiction to drugs and alcohol into new men – men of hope and men who had been changed by the power of the Gospel at work in their lives.

And so, speaking to the elder son in all of us: Do we believe people can change? Do we believe that the love of God at work in the lives of people is transformative? Do we believe that the Good News of the Gospel makes people new creations? Do we have room in our church family for ones such as these?

May it be so.

Alleluia and Amen.