There were two times in my life that I gained a huge leap forward in my understanding of God’s love for us. The first was when I got married, and especially that first year or so of marriage. I learned so much about the way God loves us and the intimacy that he desires to have with us through the experience of marriage. The second time that happened was when I became a father for the first time. I learned how much I as an earthly father could care for my own children, and that gave even more depth to my understanding of God’s love, and what he did for us in sending his Son.

Today we’re going to begin talking about a parable of Jesus that teaches us a lot about God’s love, and a big part of that is through what Jesus has to say about fathers through this story. It’s a story that a lot of you probably know well. If not, that’s okay, because we’ll get to know it really well in the next few weeks. The story is Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son that Jesus tells in Luke 15.

If you grew up in the church, you’ve heard this story your whole life and most of the time just glossed over it, “Oh yeah, the Prodigal son, I already know that story, I know the lesson behind it,” and you move on. I did that for most of my life I would guess. What changed that was when I took a class at Lincoln where we read a book called *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by an author named Henri Nouwen. This was one of those books that I wasn’t real excited about, and I didn’t figure that I was going to learn a whole lot through it. But as it turns out, this book introduced me to a whole new world behind this story that Jesus tells, a whole new take on the prodigal son, one that I think we miss a lot, and one that I think is what Jesus really meant when he told this story.

See the problem with the way I had always thought of the prodigal son before, is that I had always assumed that Jesus just meant that we were all prodigals, and that God was waiting with open arms to welcome us home. And that’s part of the lesson here, and we’ll talk about that, but there is so much more to this short little parable than that. And that’s what God used this book to open my eyes to. The book tells the story of how Henri Nouwen fell in love with a painting by Rembrandt of the Return of the Prodigal Son, and at that point in his life, he was so moved by the painting because he resonated so deeply with the prodigal himself. But as Nouwen grew older, he began to see a disconnect between himself and the idea of the prodigal son. When he told a friend about it, they suggested that maybe he resonated more with the elder brother at that point in his life than with the prodigal. That idea that he could resonate and identify with more characters in the story than just the prodigal son rocked Nouwen’s world, and it rocked my whole perception of this parable as well.

That is what we are going to talk about over the next few weeks, the different characters in Jesus’ parable, and the different ways that we can identify with those characters, and the places we see them come out in our lives. Because this story that Jesus told is about a whole lot more than just one rebellious boy. See Jesus was a master storyteller. There was a reason that everyone was captivated by the parables that he told, and why 2000 years later, there is still such a depth to his stories and his teaching.

This story of the prodigal son tells the Gospel story, but not just from one perspective. It is not just a story that those who don’t know Jesus can resonate with, but one that anyone, at any point in their walk with Christ can identify with and learn from. So, over the next several weeks, we’re going to look at this story from the perspective of the characters we see in this story: the younger son, the older brother, and the father who is father to both boys.

And since today is Father’s Day, I want to start by looking at this parable of Jesus from the perspective of the father in this story. What makes the father so important in our understanding of this parable is that he is actually what this parable is all about. A lot of people think the point is the prodigal son, but the whole point of this story is the way the father treats his son, even though he has strayed. To understand this, we have to look into the context of when Jesus tells this parable. Jesus told this parable right after the Pharisees attacked Jesus for eating with sinners. They began to grumble about how Jesus shouldn’t eat with those kinds of people, that he shouldn’t even associate with them. Jesus’ response to that was to tell not just this parable, but two other parables as well to show them exactly what God thinks of those who are far from him, exactly how God treats sinners who come back to him.

The first is the parable of the lost sheep, where the shepherd left the 99 to go in search of the one sheep that was lost. The second is the parable of the lost coin that a woman searched for until she found it. And what both of those stories have in common, is when the lost thing was found, there was a huge celebration, because this precious thing that had once been lost, has now been found. And then Jesus tells this parable of the prodigal son, the lost son.

I told you just a few minutes ago that this parable tells the story of the Gospel, and it does that through the character and the actions of the father. Humanity and God come together in this parable, sin is overcome by forgiveness. There is infinite compassion, unconditional love, and forgiveness on the part of the father. And through this parable, Jesus gave us a tangible example of what God's forgiveness is like, in a story we could understand, that we could relate to. So, if you have your Bibles with you, go ahead and open them to Luke 15.

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’

Luke 15:11-19 ESV

We’ll talk a little more about this later on, but this was the ultimate insult that a son could make against his father. It was as if his son was saying that he would rather his father be dead so he could get his inheritance, than to have his father still living and have to continue to live under his household. So, he took his inheritance, and he went off and blew it all on living however he wanted to, until the money was gone. And then, when he was at his very lowest, he finally had enough sense to turn around and come back home. This young man was lost in a very clear way.

One of the greatest parts of this story is that father loved both of his sons unconditionally from the beginning of the story, long before the prodigal left. As a parent, it seems like he should have tried to convince his son not to leave, to show him the best path for him and try to get him to follow it. But Jesus didn’t tell this story to talk about proper parenting. He told this story to show God’s love for those who are far from him. The father could have tried to force both of his sons to stay close him and not let them get hurt, not let them stray. But the love of the father was too great to force or constrain, or push, or pull his sons in the direction he wanted them to go. The love of the father offered a choice to both of his sons, to either accept his love or reject it, and then not balk or complain when they chose to reject his love. Because for his sons to truly love him, they had to be free to love him. If they were forced, it would not have truly been love. They had to make a choice on their own. Every act of sin or disloyalty or jealousy on the part of both of his sons hurt the father deeply. Yet he allowed it to happen because of his love for them.

What makes this story so powerful, what makes it so relatable, is that each one of us have had this experience with God in one way or another. We have all had a time in our lives where we have strayed away from God, where we didn’t live as he commands us to. We have all rejected him in one way or the other. And just like with the prodigal, God gives us the choice of accepting his love and following after him, or rejecting him, and he gives us the freedom to make that decision for ourselves. Because if we are truly going to love God, it has to be a choice that we make to love him, he won’t force us to do so. But then, when we turn back to God, our Heavenly Father treats us just as the father in this parable treated his sons.

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

Luke 15:20-24 ESV

When the younger son returned, the father welcomed him with open arms. There was this joyful celebration, this homecoming of a son who was once lost. Which is a beautiful picture of how God welcomes us back when we turn back to him.

But the people who were listening to this parable were surely expecting Jesus to tell of some harsh punishment, some kind of consequence that was equal to the offense of the son.

Under Old Testament law, if a son had disrespected and dishonored their parents like this young man had done, it was legal for the parents to take their child outside the city walls and have them stoned by the community. This was that big of a deal, an offense punishable by death

But I’m sure much to their surprise, the father did nothing of the kind. When his son finally came back home, the father made no move to punish him, as his son was surely afraid of. When he came back to his father, his father ran to meet him with open arms. He didn’t have anything negative to say, he didn’t have any harsh words, or punishments for his son. There were no smug, “I told you so’s,” from the father. All the father had to give his son when he came back to him was a warm embrace, and a celebration.

The prodigal had prepared this whole speech about how he was no longer worthy to be called his father’s son, and how he would be a servant in his household from that day forward. The prodigal went through his speech word for word, just as he had no doubt practiced all the way back home to his father’s house. And one of my favorite parts of this whole story is how the father completely ignores his son’s plea to be treated as a servant who is unworthy of his father’s mercy and love. His father makes no response. He doesn’t even acknowledge that his son said anything. He kind of blows him off, but for a good reason. Because the father wouldn't hear of his son claiming to be unworthy of his love and affection. No matter what he had done, no matter what his past mistakes, this was still his son, and simply because of that fact alone, he held immense value in the eyes of the father.

So, his father called the servants together, and ordered that a huge celebration be put into motion. He had the best of everything brought out for the son: the best clothing, the best jewelry, and the best of the livestock was killed to have a feast. But there was someone missing from this celebration.

“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’

Luke 15:25-30 ESV

When we think about the prodigal son, we usually think of the prodigal as the one that strayed away from the Father, he’s the one we think of as needing to be reconciled to his father, but he wasn’t the only one. The older brother had stayed home, he had stayed with his father, and done all the right things. But he was still lost because of the bitterness and resentment in his heart. He had gotten his father’s work ethic, but not his father’s heart, not his father’s unconditional love for others. Both sons strayed from their father, from their home, and both sons needed the forgiveness and unconditional love of the father. And that’s exactly what the father gave to them.

The father’s joy was so intense at his son’s return that he couldn’t wait to start the celebration. But his joy could not be complete until his older son was there as well. As soon as he knew his son was home from the fields, he left to party behind to go bring his older son to the party, to explain what had happened, to invite him to participate in the joy. But because of the jealousy and bitterness of the older brother, all he could see is that the younger brother is getting more attention than him, which translated to the love of his father in his mind.

He did not want to join this celebration in honor of his brother's return, he wanted his own celebration, as a reward for being a good son. The older brother didn’t reject the love of the father in the same way that his younger brother had. Instead, he demanded that he be shown the love of the father as he wanted it to be shown, and often times we demand the same thing of our Heavenly Father.

But even though the older son was making comparisons, the father was not. He wanted both of his sons to participate in the same joy, the same celebration. That's a hard thing for us to understand in a world full of comparisons. Who has the best job, who makes the most money, who's the most attractive, who gets the best grades. I remember when I was in a Calculus class at Purdue, and we took our final exam. I was really excited because percentage-wise, I got a B on the test, which was pretty good for me, because I pretty much hated Calculus. But the rule in the math program at Purdue at the time was that there had to be a certain number of A’s, a certain number of B’s, a certain number of C’s, and so on down the line. So even though I got a B by percentage, I was compared to a bunch of other people in my class who were a whole lot smarter than I was, and I ended up getting a D on the test as a final grade. Did I mention I hate Calculus?

We complain about being compared to other people, but we do it ourselves all the time. We also do it with other things like who does the most work for God or for the church, whose sins are most acceptable. We put sin on a scale. Little sins that are kind of okay with us are way at the bottom, and the higher you go on the sin scale, the more taboo things are. That’s why you hear people say things like ‘Well, at least I haven’t murdered anybody’. But God doesn't see us that way. There are only two distinctions in God's eyes. We are either sinners who are eternally separated from God because we have not accepted the grace Jesus. Or we are sinners who are washed clean by the sacrifice that Jesus made for us, seen as righteous in God's eyes, saved by the grace of Jesus. Those are the only two distinctions in God's eyes. And notice that in both of them, we all have the same status, we are all sinners, the only difference is Jesus. That's one of those things that's really easy to know in your head, but really difficult to believe in your heart. That's why when the older son begins comparing himself to his brother, his father answers with what we could describe as bewilderment.

And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Luke 15:31-32 ESV

There are three things I want you to take home from this parable of the prodigal son today, three things that the father in this story teaches us about our Heavenly Father. And the first is it shows us the unconditional love of God. This is a story that reminds us that no matter what character of the story we identify with, whether the prodigal, or the older brother who felt as though he were the faithful one, the father loves each one unconditionally, regardless of what kinds of hurts and heartaches they had dealt him in the past.

And sometimes we need to be reminded that not just us, but every human being on the planet, every human being throughout history, is a child of God, created in the image and likeness of God. And everyone, absolutely everyone, is precious in the sight of God simply because of that. God loves all of us unconditionally, and is always there to meet us when we turn back to him.

And in fact, he doesn’t just wait for us, he runs after us, God pursues a relationship with us. In every one of the three parables that Jesus tells here in Luke 15, the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son, God is represented by the one who is doing the searching. He is the one who takes the initiative. He is the shepherd who goes looking for his lost sheep. He is the woman who searches frantically for her lost coin. He is the father who watches and waits for his children to come home, and runs out to meet them the moment he sees them. We always think of this happening with the prodigal son, when the father ran out to meet him while he was still a long way off. But this happened with the older son, too. As soon as his father knew his son was out in the field, he went out to talk with him, he went out to bring him into the celebration, into the joy of the party.

Have you ever thought of God as hard to find, hiding somewhere where you have to do all the right things in order to find him, making it difficult for you to find him? Well the reality is that we are the ones who keep ourselves from God, not the other way around. It is our sin and disobedience to God that separates us from him. And everything that God has done since the moment sin first entered into the world has been to redeem us from our sin, and restore us back to himself. The Bible is a narrative of a God who is pursuing the people he made in his image and likeness. It is the story of God coming into our lives to bring us close to himself. Paul describes this best in Romans 5:8:

but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8 ESV

God pursued us so intensely that he gave the life of his own son so that we could be restored into his family, so we could be with him for all eternity. And when we return to him, there is a celebration. When Jesus told the parable of the Lost Sheep, he told of rejoicing when the sheep was found and brought back into the fold, and then he says this:

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Luke 15:7 ESV

The same thing was true in the parable of the Lost Coin, there was rejoicing when the coin was finally found, Jesus says

Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Luke 15:10 ESV

And in the parable of the prodigal son, the father throws a celebration because his lost son has returned home. The reason that the father was so emphatic that his son’s return should be celebrated was not that his son had earned it. It wasn’t because his son had done anything to merit the celebration. It wasn’t because the father got the money back that his son had squandered. It was all because he had his son, his child, back safe and sound. When his son had gone off on his own, he was probably gone for years without ever having contact with his father at all – so for all his father knew, his son was dead. And maybe it was easier for the father to think of his son as dead instead of thinking of what was really going on. But he celebrates his return with a feast and a celebration. But what was just a horrible thought in the mind of a worried father is a reality for us. Paul says this in Colossians 2:13-14:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Colossians 2:13-14 ESV

See, our sin didn’t just cause us to be separated from God, it caused us to be spiritually dead. We were spiritually dead in our sins, and destined for eternal separation from God. But God sent his son to pay the price for our sins, and Jesus is the only one who can bring life to people who are spiritually dead.

This father celebrated his son’s return because it meant that he didn’t have to worry about his son’s well-being any longer. But our heavenly Father celebrates when we come to him and trust in Jesus because it means that we literally went from being dead in our sins, to being alive in Christ. And there is nothing that our Heavenly Father celebrates more than having his children back, safe and sound.