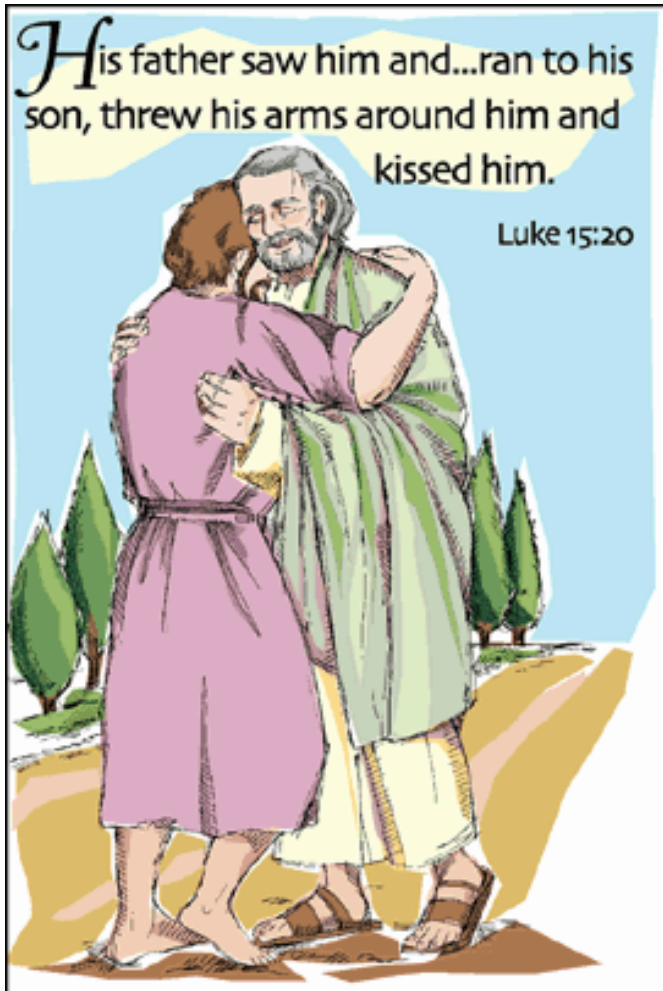


FINDING THE WAY BACK HOME

Dr. Fred Fourie ~Sunday, May 14, 2006



Luke 15:11-24: Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The 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. A few days later, the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout 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 to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But 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! I will get up 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 like one of your hired hands."' So 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. Then 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 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. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

On Mother's day, people enjoy telling stories about Mom. For instance, when the father and his son brought home a little dog, the father asked, "What shall we name it?" Her voice came from the kitchen: "You better call it, "Mother", "because if the dog stays, I go!" What is the joy of Motherhood? A mother told me that the joy of motherhood is what a woman experiences when all the children have gone to bed.

An eight-year-old wrote about mother: "A mother is a person who takes care of her kids and gets their meals, and if she's not there when you get home from school, you wouldn't know how to get your dinner and you wouldn't feel like eating it anyhow.

The Bible teaches children to love and honor their parents. There are stories in the bible portraying God as a loving parent. In the Old Testament, there are also presentations of God that are disturbing and in conflict with what we believe about a loving, unprejudiced and fair God. These stories obviously introduces us to a fabricated God whose needs and prejudices are at least as large as my own.

- Is God really a God that would smash innocent babies' heads to a pulp because the Psalmist so suggests in Psalm 137:8? "Happy shall they be who pay you back what

you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"

- The Old Testament tells of Abraham and Isaac! *Would God really pretend to expect me to murder my child just to prove that I really love him?*
- Is God a power that watches me with an almost evil eye in order to punish me if he catches me doing anything wrong? *Many parents seem to think so - and that is the image of God that they are planting in their children!*
- Is God really a power that would kill of an innocent child because *he cannot do without her in heaven any longer?*
- Would God really tear my mother from my heart *because he wants a new rose in his heavenly garden?*

What the mind cannot believe, the heart can never adore!

Do you know that each one of us carries a picture of God in our hearts and minds? The picture that you and I carry is the result, **not of a personal confrontation with God, but of a variety of factors that accumulated to create that image!** The image that we carry of God consists of what we were taught, what we saw and heard from others, what our imagination produced: People grow up with all sorts of notions of what God is like. They may see God as an Enemy, a Policeman, or even an Abusive Parent. On the other hand, perhaps they do not see God at all and only hear his silence.

The fact that we all have different images and understandings of God would not really matter that much, *if it was not for the huge influence that our God picture has on everything we say and do*. Because of Jesus, however, we no longer have to wonder how God feels or what God is like. When in doubt, we can look at Jesus to correct our blurry vision!

A teenager came to his pastor for advice: "I did something," said the boy, "that will make my dad furious when he finds out. What should I do?" The minister thought for a moment and replied, "Go home and confess your sin to your father, and he'll probably forgive you and treat you like the prodigal son." Sometime later the boy reported to the minister, "Well, I told Dad what I did." "And did he kill the fatted calf for you?" asked the minister. "No," said the boy, "but he nearly killed the prodigal son!"

There is no portrait of God in any of the world's religions more winning than this one. Maybe we should rather call it: **The Parable of the Waiting Father**. Here Jesus answers the age-old question, "What is God Like?"

JESUS SHOWS US A FATHER WHO LOVES ENOUGH TO LET GO. This is remarkable if you think about it. An arrogant SON comes to his father and says to him, in essence, *"Look old man, I'm tired of staying on the farm. I want to see the city. I do not want to wait until you die to enjoy life. Give me my share of the inheritance now."* Good Jewish boys did not talk to their fathers like this. Surely, his punishment would be swift. Surprise! The father ponders the young man's request for a few moments and then says, *"All right. If that is what you want, that is what you will get."*

Remember that Jesus is saying something to us about God. This is it: God loves us enough to let go. God did not create us to be robots. He created us in his own image. Whatever else that may mean, one thing is certain. **WE ARE FREE TO CHOOSE OUR OWN DESTINY.**

Over most of the world God has placed a sign, a go sign, a yes sign- we are free -- **free** to

love, **free** to enjoy, **free** to dream and to decide. The Father loves us enough to let go. **Every game has its rules.** So does the game of life. Some things in life are destructive. They lead to death -- physical death, emotional death, spiritual death, death of a friendship, or a marriage. **We are free to make those choices** -- even bad choices if we so desire.

Jesus shows us a father who patiently waits for us to decide. The father waits on the lost boy to make his own decision. That is the ultimate consequence of our freedom. **God** will not force us. **God** will not make us behave. **God** will not interfere. We are free to choose life or death, love or indifference, failure or success. We need to know, however, that we must live with the consequences. There ARE consequences in life, you know. Sometimes we do not want to face that truth about God and about life. We want God to be like an **indulgent** parent following behind us--cleaning up our messes. We want a soft, flabby God, created in OUR image who will somehow deliver us from our own misdoing.

Jesus introduced us to a God who is like a loving Parent. However, Jesus did not rescind the law of consequences. A cynic said, "**Some of us want to sow our wild oats and then pray for a crop failure.**"

One day he came to himself. What a great statement! He came to himself. He was not a pig. He was a boy. He was not a swine but a son. Even the servants in his father's house had plenty to eat and a warm place to sleep. What was he doing in a **pigsty**? He would go back to his father and say, "**Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.... He was taking responsibility for his own situation**, and that is always the first step in finding the way back home. The young man came to himself and he started home.

The father welcomed him back unconditionally. "Seeing him from afar, the father ran and embraced him and kissed him." He said to his servants, "Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him..." The robe was a symbol of honor. "Put a ring on his hand..." The ring was a symbol of authority. "Put shoes on his feet..." Slaves went bare-foot; sons wore shoes. "Kill the fatted calf..." **The killing of a fatted calf was only done if the entire village was invited.** Out of this picture of an ancient feast emerges a powerful illustration of what God is really like! **Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound!** When Jesus introduces us to the Father - we begin to understand what grace is all about!

It is about love that is interested in redemption and not in judgment. People who do not really know that they are loved and accepted cause most of the problems in this world. **How about you? Is there a need in your life to come home?** But I'm not good enough, some would say. That is the whole point. Thank God, we do not have to be.

Our God loves us enough to let us go. God will not force entry into our lives. God's love is unconditional -- unconditional acceptance awaiting our decision.

**Earthly fathers may be tempted to kill the prodigal child;
Our God kills the fatted calf.
AMEN**