

## ***Shiloh United Methodist Church***

### **The Generous Church: Breaking Free**

Luke 15:11-32

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October 14, 2018

“There once was a little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of root beer and started his journey.

When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old woman. She was sitting in the park just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to her and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old lady looked hungry, so he offered her a Twinkie.

She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a root beer. Once again she smiled at him. The boy was delighted!

They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word.

As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was, and he got up to leave; but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old woman and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short

time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face.

She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?"

He replied, "I had lunch with God." But, before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? She's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!"

Meanwhile, the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her son was stunned by the look of peace on her face; and he asked, "Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?"

She replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God." But, before her son responded, she added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."<sup>1</sup>

I love that story, it makes the whole idea of meeting God seem light and full of possibility. This is also not the first story I have heard that provides for the meeting of God in everyday life. This notion is central to our belief as Christian people, that God is present and working alongside of us to build the kingdom of God "here as in heaven." Yet, there is gravity in everyday life that pulls us away from doing this work. Last week we discussed some of this gravity, and as I shared over the next few weeks we are going to discuss especially financial gravity.

Last week we discussed a parable about a young man in Matthew 19 who asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus got the man's attention through some back and forth conversation and then

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.storydose.com/2014/09/lunch-with-god-inspiring.html>

said, "Give away all you own to those in need." The man walked away from Jesus with a heavy heart, because he could not escape his gravity in that moment and walk closer to Jesus.

Today, we are looking at a scripture about another rich young man, as I share the story again I invite you to pay attention to the gravity he is feeling in his life.

*Luke 15:11-32 Common English Bible (CEB)*

*<sup>11</sup> Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the inheritance.' Then the father divided his estate between them. <sup>13</sup> Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.*

*<sup>14</sup> "When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough food, but I'm starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands." ' <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.*

Let me stop for a moment and say that this young some serious gravity going on for him. There is a phenomenon in space called a black hole, a region of space so compressed that gravity won't let light escape from it. "Black hole" as a term has been used by a lot of people, messes they have to clean up, "my kitchen sink is a black hole of dirty dishes," cars that need endless repairs "my car is a money pit, or black hole," and even bills "it seems like an endless cycle of paying bills." I have seen

people in situations before where the gravity feels heavy and it does not seem to them like they will ever get out of it. This young man is not just about foolish young people, it is also the reality that at times we ourselves at any age can get to a place where we forget the world, God, and others. We turn inward and the gravity of ourselves pulls us down and in.

*“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! <sup>23</sup> Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting <sup>24</sup> because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.*

*<sup>25</sup> “Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup> The servant replied, ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup> Then the older son was furious and didn’t want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. <sup>29</sup> He answered his father, ‘Look, I’ve served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you’ve never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’ <sup>31</sup> Then his father said, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.’”*

The second son too, is feeling gravity and in his case it is I planned well dad and you are celebrating this frivolous fool of a brother I have.

Remember the story from last week, when Jesus shared with the young one about inheriting eternal life. Even the older son is focused inward on himself, Jesus has made it clear that no matter where you are in life he will celebrate the distance you have to come to escape the gravity of life and to sit in God's presence.

In the past I have used the term, "God's economy," this parable is another example. We may not feel it fair like the older son, that God loved and celebrated the lost one more than us, but in truth what Jesus has pointed out here is that it is not our job to judge what God should offer anyone to bring them back into the family of God. Stewards are people who care for things, it is a word long used in the church, and good stewardship in the church is using our resources as God calls us to. "God's economy" in this case says, "To be good stewards of God's love you have to think far beyond yourself, and celebrate the lost in a way that seems extravagant. Stewards of God's love support those nearby letting them know they are loved, but they don't need as much as the one who has come from far away."

This way of thinking makes us as Christians a paradox, we are different because of it. Carl Jung calls paradoxes the greatest spiritual gift, because they remind us that it is not always the way we think it is or the way another believes it should be. Instead, paradox points to a greater spiritual truth, that sometimes we fail to see. One like Jesus points us to today in our parable.

Most people in the United States live like owners. If I am an owner, all that I have is mine. In their book *The Paradox of Generosity*, Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson review the data and find that "very large numbers of Americans, despite wanting to enjoy happy, healthy, purposeful lives, fail to practice the kinds of generosity that actually tend to

lead to happiness, health, and purpose in life. Something gets in their way” [*Paradox*, page 99].

*The Paradox of Generosity* shares data captured in Smith’s five-year, multi-disciplinary Science of Generosity Initiative, released in 2010. This survey of two thousand Americans, along with in-depth interviews, offers new insights into the positive outcomes of generosity when it is exhibited or withheld in the life of an individual or family. Here is what they found:

44.8 percent of Americans reported that they gave \$0 of their income to any charitable purpose.

You read that right. Zero. Not one dollar. They didn’t even put a quarter in one of those plastic funnels where you can see it go round and round and spin real fast before dropping to the bottom. Nearly half of us gave away zip, nada, squat, zilch. Nothing at all. These people turned down Girl Scouts, refused high school band collections, did not slow the offering plate at church, ignored the cancer research drive, told the Salvation Army they had no change at Christmas, and then said, “I didn’t give at the office either!” This is not my judgment (except that last part); it is what people self-reported. The report went on to say this:

Another 41.3 percent gave less than 2 percent of their income away. This means that the vast majority of financial generosity in the U.S. is offered by about 15 percent of the population that is willing to give away more than 2 percent of their income. [*Paradox*, page 103]

You may be thinking: *But at least people gave their time, and time is valuable.* Yes, time is valuable. Volunteerism is

extremely important to charitable organizations. In the same study, more than 76 percent of the people self-reported that they gave no volunteer hours to any organization. That is three out of four people, a remarkable number. It seems there is a generosity famine afoot.

Lack of generosity is not about resources; it is about identity. Stewards understand that they are custodial agents of whatever sum they administer. They manage money and assets with the thought of pleasing the true owner.<sup>2</sup>

The true owner Jesus points to in the parable today, it is the one who gives us our inheritance and sends us into the world, or the one we stay to work with to care for our resources. Defying financial gravity begins by changing our economies of love and of generosity, and reminding ourselves who we are called to use our resources for. God's love is boundless and becoming good stewards starts with small steps to share lunch with God or a small offering.

Take for example Ms. Margaret.

Ms. Margaret was in her 90s when she shared this story. She had lived through the great depression, as a single mother, after her husband had passed away. (VIDEO SHOWN OF THE STORY). One day Ms. Margarte was at a meeting of the Ladies Auxillary at the church, and they announced a missions offering to be collected in November. When she arrived home she was sad, because she knew they could not afford to offer anything to this work. Her son noticed this sadness, and asked what was wrong. Ms. Margaret told her son about the missions offering, and there status financially. Her son responded by saying if she wanted to give, they could do it together.

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<sup>2</sup> From *Defying Gravity* by Tom Berlin, Program Tools Flash Drive, Sermon 2

They put a mason jar on the table and both Ms. Margaret's son and daughter took odd jobs. They pulled weeds, brought home pennies. Soon the pennies turned to nickels, nickels to dimes, and dimes to quarters. The jar filled up. When November came around, they had a few dollars. Ms. Margaret went with her children to the meeting and together they put the offering on the table, in that jar, with everyone else's.

Ms. Margaret says, "I think it was one of the proudest and happiest things we did together. That is why I like giving. It helped me teach my son and daughter who we were as a family. It helped them think about others. It was a blessing to us."

We escape financial gravity by living generously, with a generous heart. We escape by sharing our Twinkies with God, by welcoming back the forgotten, by supporting those close, and by opening ourselves to where a small offering might make us feel like a blessing to the world.

This week I invite us to a few things:

### **Clean-Out Challenge: Special Event**

This next Sunday, take time to finish cleaning out things in your home. And if they are winter clothing, or clothes people can use in the winter. Or household goods, bring them here for the FreeStore. If they are other things find where to donate or recycle them.

### **Budget Challenge**

We're distributing a handout called the Financial Planning Sheet. Using it as a guide, I encourage you to take a look at your family budget this week. If you don't have a budget, give it some thought and some work. We'll talk more about budgeting next week.

## **Aging Well**

On Wednesday here in our fellowship hall we are continuing our Aging Well program here at Shiloh, by offering community to people who are facing the challenges of aging, and people desiring to turn the later part of life into a phase they can offer to God and celebrate. It is at noon with a lunch, I encourage you to come check it out and please RSVP.

Know that our Jesus invites us to break free of gravity, and what he offers us is to know the love of God. It is the only thing that can break us free from those things that hold us down. Friends, I pray this week you find simple ways to practice breaking free and joining Jesus in the work of being stewards of love.

Shalom and Amen my friends.