

A STORY OF HUMAN WEAKNESS

Luke 15:11-32

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6 March 2016

Do you see your life as a series of random events? Or can you look at the trajectory of your life and see the ways in which God has been at work? Have you developed wisdom as you have endured life's difficulties? Have you become more empathetic as you realize that no one is perfect, and that most people are trying their best given their life's circumstances?

During this worship series, we're looking at the sacred stories in the Bible and the sacred stories of our lives. The first three weeks of Lent, we heard church members talk about how they have seen God active in their life stories. God hasn't made their lives perfect, but when they take the long view, they have seen God's presence, encouraging them through challenging times, leading them into the future with guidance and hope.

Because we have a full agenda this morning, celebrating with communion and new members, I haven't asked anyone to give a sacred story today, but we'll have more. Many of you emailed your stories - some I'll be able to use in future sermons, I'm sure - stories of the way you met your life partners, stories of how you find purpose in your life through mission.

Seeing our lives as sacred stories doesn't mean that we think our lives are predestined, for we know that God has given us free will. Our fate is determined by many factors, including the choices we make.

And we know that bad things can happen to good people, even when good people make the best choices.

Believing that God is a part of your life story doesn't mean that your life will be easy, or that the plot of your life will develop exactly as you hope it will. Believing that God is a part of your life story means that you are aware of God's presence, lifting you when you walk through

valleys, celebrating with you when you enjoy the mountain peaks. It means paying attention, looking for signs of God, observing all of your reasons for gratitude.

In one of the psalms, Psalm 46, God says this to us, “Be still, and know that I am God.” The more we pay attention to how God is speaking through the stories of our lives, the more aware we will be of our need for God, our dependence on God.

The great sacred stories of the Bible are not simple moral lessons; neither are they just stories about particular people. They are what you might call archetypal stories - stories with universal themes and meaning, stories that point beyond themselves, stories that contain deep truth.

I never get tired of the parable of the Prodigal Son. I have read it thousands of times and each time I’m surprised by it. I’m surprised at the gall of the younger son. He is beyond brash. When he says to his father, “Give me my half of the inheritance, and give it to me now”, what he is saying is almost, “Dad, I wish you were already dead.” It’s that bold of a statement. Children didn’t ask for their inheritance, not in those days, not in that culture. The younger son’s story is the story of rebellion. Now rebellion is a necessary and healthy stage in the growing-up process. All young people need, at some point and in some way, to break away from their parents, to leave home, to discover who they are. Many of us can look back and remember our own rebellious acts. Some of them were fairly innocent. (Or perhaps we’re grateful that we grew up before digital cameras and social media.) But the story of the prodigal son is the story of rebellion on steroids. He wastes every bit of his money, every last shekel, on the party lifestyle.

After that, he’s out of money, out of luck, out of options. This good Jewish boy resorts to working with pigs, the most unclean of all that is forbidden. He’s so hungry he wants to eat the food that he feeds to the pigs. And then, the Bible tells us, he comes to his senses.

He doesn't act entitled, he doesn't assume his father will treat him well. But he knows his father's heart and character, and his hopes are modest. "Maybe my father will treat me the way he treats his servants - I'll offer to work for him. At least I'll have something to eat."

It was a long walk home. Each step a lesson in humility. I can imagine him playing in his mind a rerun of the last few months of his life - watching before him, like a horror movie, all of the mistakes he made, every choice he made to waste his money, aware that he has nothing to show for it.

We do that after we make mistakes, don't we? Beat ourselves up? Call ourselves names. Feel the burn of regret and shame and guilt. You can bet there was nothing of that overconfident rebel in the boy who turned towards home.

And who is waiting at the end of the driveway? The parent who has been there every single day. The parent whose heart was broken when his son asked for the inheritance. The parent who chose to be forgiving anyway.

We have parents like this one in our church family. One of them sent me her sacred story. She gave me permission to use it, though without her name. She typed it, with a typo. She said, "This is my sacred story," but she typed, instead of sacred, the word "scared." This is her sacred story and her scared story. She writes, " I do not know if it is the beginning, middle, or end. Only our Lord knows the timeline. My adult daughter is 1.5 years into an abusive relationship. It is heart rending.

Domestic Violence knows no socio-economic boundaries. And in these days of on line "dating" sites (such as Tinder), it is much easier for our naïve and vulnerable young women to fall prey. If anyone thinks domestic violence will never impact their family, they need only ask me. And it doesn't need to be physical abuse." It is a heart-breaking story. I hope you will join me in praying for this young woman, who grew up in our church, to find the courage and strength to break free.

Loving parents wait and hope and pray. All they want is for their children to find health and wholeness. The father gives the Prodigal Son so much more than he asks for. “Treat you as one of my servants?” “I don’t think so! Do you know how hard I’ve prayed for your home-coming? We’re having a party.”

But not everyone’s in a party mood. Sibling rivalry has been around as long as there have been humans living in families, and the older son is seething. He’s the good one, you know. He’s the sibling who takes care of Mom and Dad every day, taking off work to get them to their doctor’s appointments, running their errands, not the sibling who swoops in from out of town to great fanfare. He’s like the parent who provides the discipline and washes the clothes and makes the lunches, not the one who delivers the cool presents and takes the kids to Disney. He’s the dutiful one in the family, and dutiful people can grow very resentful, especially when they feel like they’re ignored, overlooked, taken for granted.

The story ends before we know what happens to that older son. The dad tries to coax him into joining the party, but he’d rather sulk, stay outside and lick his wounds. The camera pulls away and we hear the excitement of the crowds inside, animated conversation, music for dancing. And we see the older son outside, pacing with anger. I like to think that there’s a second chapter to this story, one Luke didn’t include in his gospel. God at work in the life of the older son, healing his brokenness and reminding him of his father’s unconditional love.

Where are you in this story? Are you the rebel? Are you the waiting parent, or the one who’s celebrating? Are you the resentful one?

The good news is for all of us, wherever we find ourselves. On our own, we make some bad decisions. We wallow in shame or jealousy. On our own, the pain of life’s circumstances can be too much to bear. But we’re not alone. Wherever we find ourselves in this story or in the stories of our lives, God’s unconditional love is calling us home, into that wide and forgiving embrace of the one who knows all about us.