

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Spirit of God: We Write the Ending”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
August 27, 2017

Luke 15:11-32

This is one of the most beloved stories in all of scripture. It is one of those happy ending stories that we so desperately look for in a world that often does not have happy endings. Most of us know the story. There was a father with two sons. The younger son turned out to be a jerk when he essentially told his father, “You are dead to me. Now give me everything I will inherit as if you were dead.” The father does so. The son then wastes it all in (and I love how the writer puts it) in dissolute living and finds himself feeding pigs. Which was about as low as a Jew could go. Knowing that his father treated his servants well he goes home hoping to be a servant. Along the way, he practices his speech of repentance. Before the son arrives however, the father sees him. Runs to him. Throws his arms around him, places a robe and ring on him and then throws a party for him. Happy ending...except that’s not the ending of the story. In fact, this a story without an ending at all. I say that because there is a second chapter to this story and it is the one of the older brother. And where this story will leave us after we are done is not with an ending but a question. That question is, will either of the sons love their father like their father loves them?

To understand this, we need to return to the older brother incident. I know that many of you here this morning associate with the older brother; the good brother; the dutiful brother. Yet please know that the older brother is as big a jerk as the younger. He is so because of the way he treats his father. When he returns home, sure he will be a bit irked, but he should have understood the commandment to honor your father and mother. So when he is invited in to the party he ought to have gone. Instead he attacks his father in public, before God and his guests. He accuses his father of treating him like a slave. He accuses his father of not caring for him even though he has been the perfect son. He accuses his father of never having given him anything. This is behavior beyond rudeness. The people listening to the story in the time of Jesus would have been appalled with this behavior. What makes it even worse is that it is all...wait for it...fake news. It is all a lie, because the father has given him everything.

What we need to do is to make sure that we hear the story as Jesus told it. In verse 12 Jesus makes it clear that the father divides the property between his sons. In other words, not only is the younger son given his property, but the older is given his as well. The older inherits before his father is dead, just like his younger brother. We know that this is true when in verse 31, the father says, “All that is mine is yours.” And essentially this is where the story ends. We do not know if either brother ever appreciates what has been done for them. We don’t know if either brother realizes the depth of the father’s love for them. We don’t know this because we don’t hear from either of the brothers again. We don’t know if the prodigal appreciates the party. We don’t know if the older brother appreciates being given everything. We don’t know if either will love the father as the father loves them. And thus, it is a story without an ending...until we write it.

Today, we complete our series of We Make the Road by Walking. We have walked from creation to new creation. We have walked through the Old and New Testaments. We have walked with the patriarchs and with the disciples. And at every turn we have had to ask ourselves the same question that

they had to ask themselves, does God love us? This story without an ending reminds us of what we have learned on our walk, that God has given us everything; life, food, community, grace and salvation; that everything God has is ours. The question this morning is, do we really believe it and act like it? Do we live in gratitude? Do we let that love enfold us and change us? Do we believe it and let it transform us from head to toe? To draw this series to a close, I want to leave you with an image...a song...a reminder to take with you as you continue to walk. So sit back and watch. Note: to see the video, open a browser and search for "Our Father is waiting - Malcolm Gordon."

God is waiting for us. God is running toward us. God is loving us. God has given us everything. My challenge to you on this day is to ask yourselves this question. Am I loving God like God loves me and showing that love in a life that loves others?