

BGO Sermon for 9-11-16 – God’s Story, My Story, Our Story: Prodigal Father
Isaiah 6:1-8 (NKJV) James 1:16-18 (NLT) 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 (CEB) Luke 15 (Message)

At the last churches I served, I led a Bible Study called “Before Amen” by author and pastor Max Lucado. In one session, he invited us to imagine driving down a deserted road, when suddenly the “check engine” light begins to flash bright red and the vehicle rolls to a stop on the side of the road. He talked about how relieved we would be when we saw the mechanic’s truck coming down the road, knowing he had the skill and expertise to figure out what was wrong, and tools to fix the problem. And of course, he made the analogy of God being the mechanic of our lives, with all the power and ability to move our lives forward.

All well and good, but thing is, I stopped going to my last two mechanics; I lost my confidence in them. The first ones I’d used for years, but there was a repair that cost a lot of money, more than I thought there should be, and even after that, the problem wasn’t fixed. Then my kids went to them with car trouble, and in my mind they were mistreated, taken advantage of. Then at another place, we no sooner drove the vehicle off the lot than the “check engine” light was back on. We turn around and show the head mechanic, he tells us there’s 120 things that can make the light go on, and when that happens, the car won’t start like it’s supposed to.

I’ve become convinced the reason so many of our lives are stranded on the side of the road, that we’re broken down and worn out, that things never seem to get fixed, is that we don’t trust the Mechanic. The cost of discipleship is more than what we thought. We see what we think the problem is, & it isn’t getting fixed. We think a family member was treated poorly, we’re taken advantage of by others. We get through one crisis and 120 more seem to pop up. And in it all, our lives don’t run right in our eyes. We wonder why God doesn’t act. We wonder if God cares.

Folks, I can testify that God does care, and God does act; He’s proven it again and again. So I’ve also become convinced that part of my call to ministry is to testify that **GOD IS GOOD**.

For the last three Sundays we’ve looked at the same Gospel passage, commonly known as the story of the Prodigal Son. But as we’ve pointed out, really everyone in the story was Prodigal - excessive and extravagant - in their behavior. The younger brother was prodigal in his rebellion. The older son? Prodigal in his resentment and judgment of his wayward brother. Even the servants were prodigal in their service, and in their joy.

Through it all, we’ve seen reflections of our lives: how we think and act (for better or worse), and how Jesus would have us act as Kingdom Servants and as good older

brothers, all in the image of our loving Father God. But now we get to the good part, the most incredible part of Jesus' story, because the most prodigal in the story - the most excessive, extravagant and lavish in love and grace- was the Father.

We've pointed to it all along: how the Father was incredible in His patience with the sons, like God is so patient with us in our rebellion; how He continually looked for the younger son and saw Him a long ways off, as God looks out for us; how He was willing to reach out to the sons, rather than demanding they come to Him; how He embraced the pigsty-filthy son, just as God embraces us in our sin; how both boys are invited back into the family and into the feast, as we are welcomed as children of God.

As if all that wasn't enough, we see even more in the gifts the Father gives, again reflections of the gifts our heavenly Father gives us.

He starts by giving away the farm: all He's grown, all He's built, all He's created. That's God with us: this entire world, this life we live, all that sustains us and blesses us, it all come from God. ***“Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens”***: that's how the Apostle James puts it.

And all of it comes unconditionally, no strings attached - to develop or to waste, to invest in or to squander.

At Thursday's Bible study, we prayed for farmers during the upcoming harvest. Farm folks out there, you've maybe heard how much of a “city-boy” I am; anyone willing to let me climb in your \$400,000 combine and drive it through your field? Then imagine the sacrifice God made in His gift to us: taking all His most precious, most beautiful, most miraculous creations, and giving them to us, knowing how we would damage them? And then, giving us the wonderful promise that everything damaged He would restore, remake and renew?

Then, take a look at what the Father gives the returning son. He starts with clean clothes: the only clothes that could look clean to Father God, being clothed in Christ. Let me try to be clear: God does work through the Holy Spirit to sanctify us, to clean us up from our sin; as we read in the Psalms, ***As far as east is from west— that's how far God has removed our sin from us.*** That handles the bad, but we still fall well short on the good we do; it's Isaiah that tells us that ***even our best actions are filthy through and through, like filthy rags.***

The good news here is that our Father God takes care of that as well. Not only does God wash away our sin through the blood of Christ, God clothes us in Christ's righteousness, so when God looks at us, He sees not just any of the good we've

done, but all the good that Jesus has done on our behalf, *so that through him we could become the righteousness of God.*

Back to the parable: the father says, *Put the family ring on his finger.* That's the signet ring; that's what they used to make contracts, to buy and sell. Folks, we buy and sell on God's bank account. At the Wednesday Bible study, we talked a bit about us being God's ambassadors; representing God in this world like a foreign dignitary. The Apostle Paul writes *we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us,* So as we bring the Good News - that God is reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them - we can do it with confidence, knowing that message carries the authority of God.

Next, *sandals on his feet.* Another reference comes to my mind, this from Paul as he wrote about what we call the Armor of Faith: *"having sandaled your feet with the readiness of the good-news of peace."* God gives us readiness, preparation for a life as Kingdom Servants and Children of God. Again, this is a gift that can be developed or wasted, invested in or squandered. Bible study, prayer, worship, Christian fellowship and discipleship - all of it helps us live that abundant life... if we sandal ourselves with them.

Just one more: *the grain-fed heifer, the fatted calf.* The preparation, the feeding given to that animal, meant it was designated...as a sacrifice to God. Our Heavenly Father takes the things that are God's - His Glory, His Power, His Wisdom - and shares them with us. God gives us that vision of Him high and lifted up, seated in glory, and invites us to join in the calls of Holy, Holy, Holy. And folks, that's what true worship is, what our services here are supposed to be, with us seeing God for who God is, high and seated on Heaven's throne, and lifting His name high and lifted up.

I mentioned that the Isaiah 6 passage is one of my life Scriptures, because it tells my story. I was very much a man of unclean lips - unclean mind and heart as well. Then I got that vision of God high and lifted up, and I knew that I was undone, recognizing that empty hole in my life that only God can fill. But then came my salvation through Christ, God's coal touching my lips and penetrating all the way to my soul. Then came the call: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" And I said, "Here am I! Send me." And through it all, God has brought blessing upon blessing, gift after gift after gift.

Folks, GOD IS GOOD - and He's not just good, He's Christmas morning good - filling us with joy, bring gift upon gift, celebrating new birth with us. He's Good

Samaritan Good, stopping to help us when we are in need. He's Good Friend Good, Best Friend Good, walking with us, rejoicing with our highs and holding us up when things are lowest. And He's Good, Good Father good, holding us close when we hurt the most.

Once we get that right in our life - how incredibly, unbelievably GOOD God is - everything else in our lives falls into place. We can ask, plan and work toward God's Kingdom come, knowing what a good & marvelous world that would be. And we can look forward to the Kingdom TO COME, the one Christ will establish when He comes again in glory. We can trust God's will for us, knowing that God has good plans for us, plans to prosper us and not to harm us. And we can freely ask for anything, knowing our good and gracious God will give us good gifts.

Even more, God gives us the Holy Spirit, the counselor and helper, who will continue to teach us and remind us of God's goodness toward us, even as we're struggling when life breaks down.

It's because of Jesus the Messiah, who died like an unblemished, sacrificial lamb, and whom God then raised from the dead and glorified, that we can trust God, that we know we have a future in God, that we even have possibility of an open, intimate, Spirit-filled relationship.

I started out tonight talking about mechanics. My dad ran a few gas stations in Geneseo when I was growing up; those were the days when they were still service stations and still worked on cars, so my dad was a mechanic as well as business owner. Was he the best mechanic in town? No, but he knew the ones who were, and would take the tough problems to them. But he was a good mechanic. Good in that he was the one who plowed driveways on Christmas morning because he knew the people were going out of town to celebrate with family. Good in that he worked til midnight to get a stranded traveler back on the road. And people knew he was good, so much so that they didn't just bring their car problems to him, they'd ask for his advice about their lives.

God is good - good in that He will plow through the problems in our path, making it so we can celebrate. Good in that he'll work on the broken down parts of our life journey far into the night: after all, He never sleeps nor slumbers. Good in that we can go to Him in all the aspects of our lives - in our celebrations and sorrows, in our highs and our lows in our laughing or mourning, in our mountain tops and in our valleys. Go to him: reach up to him like a child reaches for a loving parent. You call out to God for help and he helps—he's a good Father that way.