

WORSHIP

Sermon | 8.12.2018



Fruits of the Spirit: Gentleness

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Galatians 5:1-2, 16, 22-25

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

So he told them this parable: ‘There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with* the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” ²⁰So 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”* ²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.



25 'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" ³¹Then the father^{*} said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." '

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Today we conclude our sermon series on the Fruits of the Spirit. Our goal has been to take one of these virtues that the Apostle Paul lifts up to us as way our lives can evidence the grace of Jesus Christ – and we have paired a fruit with a story from Scripture about what that virtue looks like when it is lived. My hope is that these sermons have helped you think concretely about your walk of discipleship – about the ways that your life and your choices might bear witness to the good news of our salvation...not a salvation that we earn, but a salvation that we are called to share.

This morning our fruit is gentleness. And our second Scripture is the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Of all the parables that Jesus tells, this is surely the most beloved and the most familiar. Preachers love this story because there are so many different ways to preach it. I heard about a preacher who was so taken by the possibilities of the parable that he preached a sixteen-week sermon series on the text. After the sixteenth week, a sweet elderly woman in the congregation took the preacher's hand on the way out of the church, looked him dead in the eye and said, "Preacher, after hearing all those sermons, I can honestly say that I am so sorry that boy ever ran away."

The truth is, this parable is so familiar we almost miss the point. The story of the "prodigal son" has almost achieved Aesop's Fable status – it has become more a tale of morality than a parable about God's grace. Sometimes, when things are overly familiar, we gloss over the details in a rush to get to the end of the story. So this morning I would invite you to listen, extra carefully, to this well-worn and wonderful story – a story about grace, about human relationships, and about the heart of God.

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I haven't preached on this parable sixteen times, but I've preached it enough to have taken a few different directions in my sermons.



More than once, my focus was on the youngest son, the “Prodigal.” Maybe you have an affinity for this character: his obviously bad choices, the way he turned his back on his father by demanding the inheritance early, his profligate lifestyle, the way he hit rock bottom while dining with the pigs, his courageous journey home. For some of us, the Prodigal’s story mirrors our own and thinking about what it is like to receive free, unmerited grace is a powerful reminder of what is true about our walk of faith.

Another time, I preached on this parable from the perspective of the older brother. The older brother in this parable is who I would suspect many of us are or think we are: responsible, a rule-follower, someone who does what is expected of us and – in turn – expects others do the same...because that is what makes everything work, right?? It’s amazing how news that feels so great to the younger brother can feel so much different to the older brother...because, let’s face it, what happens in this parable **just isn’t fair** for someone who has spent their lifetime following the rules.

At its essence, this is a parable about grace. God’s grace – which always confounds our expectations and pushes the boundaries of what we think we do or don’t deserve.

I’ve focused on different aspects of that grace when I’ve preached the parable before, but today I want to focus on the third character in the story: the father.

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I don’t know about your experience, either as a parent, or with your parents, but from my perspective (formed by my experience), I do not envy the father’s predicament in this story.

The scene most artists rightly focus on when they depict the story of this parable is that of the father’s welcome of his youngest son.

But the scene that has always gripped me is what it must have been like for the father to leave the party to come out and meet his eldest who was pouting because he was mad both at his little brother for his irresponsible behavior, and at his father for his parenting choices that called for a party instead of tough love.

Standing at the breach between children who are at odds, choosing one tactic with one child and a different tactic with another, knowing you are going to be criticized for whatever choice you make, and that, the next day, the work of parenting will continue...because after the party, that youngest son is going to need some help, and the oldest son is going to still need an attitude adjustment – that does not sound like a fun place to be.

And, frankly, because I’ve stood in the breach between children before, and – let’s just say – I wasn’t a model of calm, what is so striking to me about this parable is how **gentle** the father is toward both of his sons. Toward the youngest, of course, as the father runs toward the child to meet him with a ready embrace. And the oldest, where the father goes out of his way to



patiently listen to the complaint, and then calmly remind him of the fact that he, too, is beloved and a part of the family.

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When I look out at the world – and especially when I consider how our children see the world – I sometimes worry that we don't have enough models of what it looks like to be gentle.

I particularly worry about our boys – how they learn about what it means to be a man. What it is to be strong. How they are supposed to relate to one another, to women, to their neighbors.

I fear that most of what they see is

aggression packaged as a virtue,

power defined by strength,

anger as a method to get what it is you want.

And they don't look any farther than the television, or the Xbox, or the White House, or the gridiron to have those narratives confirmed.

A critique that I have heard is that if we shelter our kids, and shield them from the real world, and don't give them the tools to operate within a culture that demands hard work and initiative and the ability to manage through failure then we are raising a generation of "snowflakes."

I agree that we should not coddle our children.

But that does not exclude the importance of modeling for them the importance of being gentle.

And as we sit in this moment in history, I find myself longing for ways we can change the narrative away from aggression and competition and hate and mistrust – because I think we can see that that road doesn't lead to anywhere good.

I long for ways we can lift up the virtue and the value of dealing gently with one another.

The reality is that to be gentle is to be strong.

In the parable that Jesus tells, the father's role was to act in a way that kept open the possibility that the family could stay together.

It takes strength to look beyond the present – beyond any immediate frustration, or mistake, or conflict – and stay open to a different kind of future.



In a time when it feels like worlds and cultures collide – where we are learning to navigate so much change – what is easy is to react; to defend; to resist; to argue; to treat one another with contempt.

What is more difficult – and more faithful – is to believe that, somehow, like the father in our parable, God wants his family to be together. And to believe that requires that we are strong enough to deal gently with one another.

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Jesus told his followers these stories called parables because he wanted to hold up – in the present – a vision of the world that God has planned for our future.

Parables were a way that Jesus lifted the disciples gaze beyond the places that felt stuck and hopeless to a place that could inspire those disciples to live differently.

One of Jesus' more contemporary disciples was Fred Rogers.

Mr. Rogers, as most of us knew him, started his career in television not because he liked TV but because he recognized the power and influence it had in developing the minds of children.

A graduate of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and an ordained Presbyterian minister, Fred Rogers started the Mister Rogers show in 1963 – and for the next 38 years, until 2001, he welcomed his neighbors and many of us into his living room, where we would put on that cardigan and his comfortable shoes and show us what it looked like to treat people gently, and with kindness, and respect.

From Vietnam, to the Civil Rights Movement, through the growing polarized political landscape of the 1980s and 1990s – if you tuned in to PBS on Saturday morning you would find Fred Rogers telling a parable – holding up a vision of a different world – informed by the fruit of the spirit.

There's a new documentary out about Mr. Rogers, and in it we learn that later in his life, Fred Rogers wondered if anything he did made a difference. If all of that gentleness changed anything about the world.

And, the truth is, that's a question that every one of Jesus' disciples is bound to ask at one time or another...because we do not yet live in the world as God promises it will be.

But we trust.

And we hope.

And so in the meantime we practice love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And in so doing, we point to the possibility of a different world.

