

Wesley United Methodist Church

March 31, 2019

“Heaven’s Linen Closet.”

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

A father tells of putting his 4-year-old daughter to bed one evening. He read her the story of the Prodigal Son. They discussed how the younger son had taken his inheritance and left home, living it up until he had nothing left. Finally, when he couldn’t even eat as well as the pigs, he went home to his father, who welcomed him.

When they finished the story, the Dad asked his daughter what she had learned. After thinking a moment, she said, “Never leave home without your credit card!”

Well, that’s a pretty good lesson, though perhaps not the one Jesus had in mind.

Pastor Ronnie White of Midland TX tells a story that is like many you have heard before. This one is touching, I believe you will appreciate it.

It is about an itinerant preacher many years ago named G.W. Ravensbury. Ravensbury made his living preaching off of trains. He’d ride a train to a town, preach, get back on the train, and head to another town.

Ravensbury told the story of an unforgettable train ride. He was sitting at the back of a railcar and noticed a young man who was sitting a few rows ahead of him. The young man had a cardboard suitcase stuffed underneath his seat. He appeared very anxious. He would get up, pace the car for a bit, and then sit back down. He did this every ten minutes or so. Finally, Ravensbury decided that he would go have a chat with the young man. So he got up, asked the young man if he could have a seat next to him, and introduced himself. “Son, my name’s Ravensbury, and I’m a preacher. You seem like you’ve got a lot on your mind. Would you like to talk?”

Ravensbury said it was like opening a spigot. The young man’s life story just came pouring out. “Me and my pa didn’t get along well at all when I was coming up,” he said. “We’d fuss and fight, Shoot, we’d get into it over nuthin.’

“One day we were getting after each other real hard—I can’t even remember what about—when I said something like, ‘Well why don’t I just leave!’ And my Daddy said, “Son, there’s the door, don’t let it hit you on the backside on the way out.’ I didn’t really want to go, but I was so angry that I went to my room and packed everything I could find into my suitcase. As I went to leave, my Daddy yelled back at me and said, ‘Son...if you walk out that door...don’t ever come back.’ I was so mad I just left.

“Things didn’t go too well for me after that. I kept wandering from one po’dunk town to another working one piddlin’ job after another, and I wasn’t doing so good. One night I was out drinking with some buddies, and we got this idea to try to rob this liquor store. When we got caught, I got sentenced to prison.

“But before I got out, I decided to write to Mom and Dad. I told them I was in prison, and about to get out. I said that I was sorry for how I left and for what I did. That I’d understand if they never wanted to see me again, but I’d be passing through town. You see my house is just off the tracks here about 10 miles ahead. I told them that if they wanted to see me to tie something white out in the tree. That if there wasn’t anything white, I’d just go on through to the next town and they’d never have to hear from me again. Mr. Ravensbury, if there’s nothing white hanging out in that tree,” the young man said, “I don’t know what I’m gonna do. I’m at the end of my rope. I just don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

Ravensbury said as they grew closer to his home, the young man became even more nervous. Finally, the young man nudged Ravensbury and said, “My house is right up around this bend. Do you think you could see if there’s anything white tied there for me? I just can’t look.”

Ravensbury said he pressed his forehead up against the window hoping to see something—anything—that was white tied up in a tree. And he said as they as they turned the corner, it was the most majestic sight he’d ever seen.

Apparently, that family had emptied their house of every towel, every washcloth, every bed spread, every pillow case, even every piece of underwear—everything in the house was out there flapping in that tree. It was just a tree of white out there in the yard. Ravensbury called the boy, “Young man...look!”

As soon as the young man caught a glimpse of the tree, he grabbed his suitcase, rushed out the door, and jumped off the train car as quick as he could. Ravensbury said that the last image he saw was of that young man dragging his cardboard suitcase up the hill, and an older couple bursting out of the house to come greet him.

Ravensbury said that that is a picture of what God is like. The cross was God’s way of emptying Heaven’s linen closet of everything white so that it could be known for all-time that God wants us home. No matter what we’ve done, or where we’ve been—for us please just to come home.

Some of you have seen that story played out in your own families. A son, a daughter, a brother, an uncle—someone in the family who, for a while, becomes lost to the family. Alcohol, drugs, a need to escape home—it’s an old story. Maybe you, yourself, were once a prodigal. Maybe you still are.

In our hearts all of us are prodigals to one degree or another. Or we are the elder brother, so self-righteous that we cannot even admit our need for repentance. That's human nature. That's why this familiar story strikes home as it does. You know the story. It begins with the first few verses of the fifteenth chapter of Luke:

"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them...."

Luke sets the scene perfectly. Tax collectors and sinners were gathering around to hear Jesus. As you know, tax collectors were universally despised by the righteous and unrighteous alike. They had close ties to the occupying Roman government and used despicable means of securing their income.

A rabbinic rule stated that one should not associate with ungodly people, so the rabbis would not even teach those they judged to belong to the class of sinners, which included the tax collectors. Yet here was Jesus (a Jewish rabbi) teaching a group of tax collectors and sinners as if they were as acceptable as anyone else. This disgusted the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. This is the setting for today's scripture. Jesus tells a parable with this particular audience in mind.

A man had two sons. There is a remarkable contrast between the two boys. That happens in families, doesn't it? Well, he is nothing like his older brother, we sometimes say. The younger one of the sons was restless while the older boy was compliant to the wishes of his family. There is nothing shocking about that. Then one day the younger boy comes to his father and says, "Father, give me my share of the estate."

Normally an estate was not divided and given to the heirs until the father was very old and could not manage any more, or after he was dead. The younger son's request was therefore seen as an act of rebellion. He actually was committing a grave sin in making such a request. There was no law or custom among the Jews which entitled a son to a share of his father's wealth while the father is still alive.

Requesting his share of his father's estate was a radical act by the younger son. But the father's act was even more radical. Jesus says, "So the father divided his property between them." I wonder if Jesus wasn't saying something to us here about God. God respects our freedom. If we are determined to rebel and go our own way, God will not interfere. We can rebel for all eternity, and God will not overpower our decision. God always leaves us free to choose.

The father let his wayward son have his way. The son's request surely hurt his father's heart. How many of you would feel hurt if your child basically said, "I can't wait till you die to have all that you have in store for me so give it to me now." His heart was broken, but he let his son go.

We know the story, the younger son gathered his belongings and inheritance and went off to a far land, away from his father's house. He squandered his money in wild living. It was party time all the time, and he was living it up. Until...the money ran out...and all the fun ended. The younger son had spent all that he had and then there was a recession and jobs for people under 30 dropped off the radar and he was forced to move back home.

No, it doesn't read quite like that, but you get the idea. Things were a little more desperate back then. There was a famine in the land and with no money, literally, he could have starved to death, but he got a job feeding pigs. To us today, that may not seem as a big deal, though not exactly desirable. But to Jews, swine were considered unclean (Lev.11:7). No Jew would take this job willingly. But this boy was desperate—so desperate that he even considered eating the slop that was fed to the pigs.

Finally, he came to his senses. He said, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'" And so with his tail between his legs, as the old cliché goes, he starts home. And then something extraordinary happens. Luke says, "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him..."

The son begins the very carefully rehearsed speech about how sorry he is, but the father isn't even listening to him. He's too busy giving his servants orders. "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So, they began to celebrate.

Those listening to Jesus share this parable—both the religious leaders and the sinners—would have been stunned by this father's demonstrations of grace toward his wayward son. For one thing, it was undignified for an elder man to lift up his robes and run. And yet the father ran, and he kissed the boy, and he had his best robe placed upon him and a ring put on his finger symbolizing his restored place in the household, sandals representing his status as a free man because slaves didn't wear shoes, and they had a feast. Can you put yourself in the place of that father welcoming home a lost child? Many families today can.

It's a story told time and again. A young person wanders far away from home. A parent waits and hopes and prays...and then, hopefully reconciliation takes place.

Even if we have not had a young person in our family who has wandered into the far country, it is still our story. For it is the story of the human heart wandering far from God until that day comes when it surrenders to the wonder of God's grace. All of us must sooner or later take that journey home and our heavenly father is waiting to welcome us.