

Sermon Note: Feasting with the Found

Third Sunday in Lent

Introduction

As we continue our Lenten series *The Last Supper: Conversations That Led to the Cross*, we turn to one of the most familiar parables in the Gospels—and possibly the most misread. A young man takes his inheritance early, wastes it, ends up feeding pigs in a far country, and finally heads home with a prepared speech. His father sees him coming from a distance and runs. Before the son can finish his apology, the father is already calling for the best robe and a party. Bishop Will Willimon wants us to understand who the real subject of this story is: it's not the son who wandered, but the father who never stopped watching the road. This week, the question Bishop Willimon asks throughout this series—Who is God, and what is God up to?—takes us to a far country, at the end of a long walk home.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6e-qui-K-I>

In this clip from *Les Misérables* (2012), a bishop offers a night's shelter to a released convict. When the man steals the silver and is dragged back by police, the bishop responds with a gift instead of a charge.

Why This Video?

The Bishop doesn't ask what Valjean did to earn nineteen years in prison. He doesn't require a confession, an apology, or a promise to do better. He sets a place at the table and calls him an honored guest. When Valjean repays the hospitality with theft, the Bishop's response is to give him more, and even frames the theft as a gift already given. The police are doing exactly what police are supposed to do. The Bishop removes the premise entirely. He tells them the silver was a gift already given. If there was no theft, there is nothing for the law to act on. He steps outside the system altogether.

Video Discussion Questions

1. The Bishop sets a place for Valjean at the table without knowing anything about him beyond the fact that he needs a meal. What do you make of that?
2. When the police bring Valjean back, the Bishop has a choice. What does he choose, and why does it matter *how* he does it?
3. The Bishop doesn't just cover for Valjean, he adds the candlesticks. How does that detail change the scene?
4. The police are doing exactly what they're supposed to do. What do you see in their reaction when they're dismissed?
5. Valjean spent nineteen years in prison. What do you think it does to a person when they encounter something so radically unexpected?

6. The Bishop's grace doesn't require anything from Valjean in return. He doesn't ask for gratitude, a promise, or even comprehension. What kind of grace is that?
7. When have you witnessed or been on the receiving end of a response to a wrong that was more generous than anyone had a right to expect?
8. What do you think is the hardest part of receiving unearned grace?
9. After he's released, Valjean has to make sense of what happened. What do you think makes this difficult for him?
10. Part of Valjean's struggle is about who he is *now*, as a result of the Bishop's actions. Why do you think that question is so important in this moment?

Luke 15:11-32 (CEB)

¹¹Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. ¹²The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the inheritance.' Then the father divided his estate between them. ¹³Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

¹⁴"When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. ¹⁵He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough food, but I'm starving to death! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands." ' ²⁰So he got up and went to his father.

"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. ²¹Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.' ²²But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! ²³Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting ²⁴because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵"Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. ²⁷The servant replied, 'Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.' ²⁸Then the older son was furious and didn't want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. ²⁹He answered his father, 'Look, I've served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you've never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.' ³¹Then his father said, 'Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.'"

Scripture Study Questions

1. The father sees his son "while he was still a long way off" and runs to meet him. What does that detail—watching the road, running—reveal about the father's posture the entire time his son was gone?
2. The younger son rehearses a careful speech on the way home. The father interrupts him before he can finish. What does that interruption tell you about how God responds to us?
3. The older brother has a legitimate grievance. He stayed, he worked, he obeyed. What makes his complaint reasonable, and what does it miss?
4. The older brother won't call the younger one "brother"—he says "this son of yours." What does that language tell you about what resentment does to the way we see other people?
5. The father doesn't argue with the older brother or correct him. He simply says, "Everything I have is yours." How do you hear those words—as reassurance, invitation, or something else entirely?
6. Bishop Willimon suggests we rename this "the parable of the prodigally gracious father." How does shifting the focus from the son's return to the father's response change what this story is about?
7. The parable ends without telling us whether the older brother goes inside. Why do you think Jesus leaves the ending open?

Weekly Action

Identify one situation this week where someone receives something you don't think they've earned — recognition at work, forgiveness in a family conflict, a second chance you wouldn't have offered. Notice your first reaction, and be honest about it.

Then, on a piece of paper or in a note on your phone, write down your answers to these three questions: *What did I feel? Why did I feel it? What would the father in this parable do?*

Then take your answers to God in prayer, and ask God to show you what might be behind these answers. Is there resentment? Where is it coming from? What would it be like to let it go? Pay attention to how God might be standing alongside you, just as the father stood alongside his sons.

Prayer

Prodigally gracious God—you watch the road for us, you run to meet us before we can finish our rehearsed apologies, and you throw the party we didn't think we deserved. There is no country too remote, no distance too far, to wander beyond your searching love. Teach us to celebrate when someone comes home. And when we find ourselves standing outside the feast with arms crossed, remind us: everything you have is already ours. Amen.