

A Lot Can Happen in Forty Days

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 / Psalm 32

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**[title slide]**

This morning's message is based, in part, upon Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32, let's lean in & listen...to God's word for us this day...

**[scripture slides]**

*15 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.]<sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable:*

*<sup>11</sup> "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The 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. <sup>13</sup> A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup> When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup> He would gladly have filled himself with<sup>[b]</sup> the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> But 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! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" <sup>20</sup> So 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. <sup>21</sup> Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>22</sup> But 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. <sup>23</sup> And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.*

*<sup>25</sup> "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> He called one of the slaves and asked what*

*was going on. <sup>27</sup> He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup> Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup> But 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. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' <sup>31</sup> Then the father<sup>[d]</sup> said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> But 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.'"*

### **Let us Pray:**

Come, O Holy Spirit, come.

Come as the fire and burn,

Come as the wind and cleanse,

Come as the light and reveal,

Convict us, Convert us, Consecrate us...until we are wholly thine.

And now, Lord, my prayer is simply this:

That the words of my mouth

And the words of all our hearts will be found pleasing and acceptable to you,  
for you are our rock and our redeemer...Amen.

### **[Title slide]**

### **Sermon**

40 – it's a number with significance – a lot can happen in 40 – whether it be years, days, minutes.

Don't believe me?

### **[Slide – Tom Brady's Tweet]**

- Ask The Tampa Bay Buccaneers – 40 days after his retirement from the NFL – Tom Brady posted the following on Twitter: "These past two months I've realized my place is still on the field and not in the stands. That time will come. But it's not now. I love my teammates, and I love my supportive

family. They make it all possible. I'm coming back for my 23<sup>rd</sup> season in Tampa. Unfinished business"

**[Slide – Lou's NCCA March Madness Bracket]**

- Tune into NCAA – March Madness – Basketball – each half is 20 minutes – (not counting timeouts and commercial breaks) – and a lot can happen – *Don't believe me?* – just look at my bracket – as you can see after round one – one of my national championship game teams was knocked out!

**[Title slide]**

40 – it's a number with significance – in terms of our faith it has many stories connected to it:

- Noah on the Ark 40 days & 40 nights
- Israelites in the wilderness 40 years
- Jesus in the wilderness 40 days – his time of discernment with regard to God's call upon his life

Of importance is to note that 40 is not necessarily to be taken literally – it's more about taking time – specifically the time necessary for something to happen – in terms of faith it's about the time necessary to discern – the place and call of God upon a life or community.

Was Noah on the Ark 40 days & nights?

Were the Israelites in the wilderness 40 years?

Was Jesus in the wilderness 40 days?

Could have been 40 – could have been less – could've been more – what we know is at the end of that time – conclusions were reached – faith was formed – clarity was clarified – direction was discerned.

Right now – in the church – we are in the 40 days of Lent.

We're making our way – with Jesus – to the Cross and Resurrection.

We're intentional about taking '*...the time necessary...*' to connect back to the crux of our Christian story:

- Faithfully seeking to understand Golgotha's redemptive act since a life-ending cross succumbed to an empty tomb's life-giving resurrection –
- Faithfully allowing ourselves to be reclaimed the promise as one of our Presbyterian Creed reminds, “in life and in death, we belong, heart and soul, to Almighty God.”
- Faithfully pondering our response to the generosity of God.

**[Slide – Painting *The Return of the Prodigal* by Sieger Koeder]**

Which brings us to today's familiar, lengthy story of family – this Luke 15 story calls us into an awareness that something big is out there that can change our lives – if we will but take ‘...*the time necessary...*’ to allow it to sink into the soil of our lives.

I've read this week from several preachers I follow online that this story is difficult to preach because it's so familiar – so unsettling – so routine – they've preached it so many times before they're not sure they have a new way into the story – they're perplexed...

Perhaps that is a good start – to be perplexed – even perturbed by this story – perhaps that's even the point of the parable.

A preacher recalled one response to this story by an undergrad student in a college course they were teaching, the student looked at their Bible shaking and said, “This makes me so mad.”

The preacher said, “Then you understand the parable. The question is, ‘Can you overcome that and join the party that God is throwing for the repentant?’”

We all have persons with whom we identify in this story.

We all can understand this older siblings response – he stayed around – did what was expected – the younger delved into dissolute living – care free – until the money ran out and rock bottom became the place of residence – he goes home – the welcome committee is instructed to throw a grand gala – the older child is in the field doing work – no one says anything – and he returns to see the festivities – and he's *peev*ed.

As the youngest of three children – yet oldest son (okay, I’m the only son 😊) – this story has been one of playful contention in our family.

- *Mom and Dad love you best.*
- *You get away with everything.*
- *They made the rules for me...They overlook the rules for you.*

I always contended that after I came along, my parents were just tired and worn out.

### **[Slide – The Cross and the Prodigal by Ken Bailey]**

Having said that, the following is something that has opened my eyes to this story, it comes from Dr. Kenneth Bailey – ordained in the Presbyterian Church USA – Bailey was a New Testament professor and prolific author – especially regarding the biblical story in its Middle Eastern setting.

I heard Dr. Bailey speak at the New Wilmington Presbyterian Church around the time his book *The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants* was released. He was telling about how he interviewed Middle Eastern fathers and men about their understanding of the *Prodigal Son* story. What he said, has changed the way I read the story – the overwhelming response to this story was outrage at the audacity of the request and response – by both the younger & older son.

I had to do a mental double take – did he just say there was outrage at the older son’s response – now I was on the edge of my seat.

He went on to explain, the request of the younger son, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.,” essentially was saying, ‘I wish you were dead.’

What I had overlooked in the text was the next line, “So he divided his property between them.,” – between the younger and older son.

Upon hearing this story, Bailey reported, that most Middle Eastern men responded by saying that both sons would be rebuked – the first for the audacity of the request – the second for accepting his share of the divided property – the

willingness to accept the inheritance rather than deny it before the father's death was implication of the same sentiment, 'I wish you were dead.'

Bailey's unpacking of this aspect to the story has caused me to become cautionary toward relying on my own blessed assurance when I believe *I am in the right*. It opens us to see the possibility that even when we hold what we might call the "moral high ground" that we might actually be on shaky ground – to quote Shakespeare, at times, perhaps we, "doth protest too much" – or as Jesus might say, "we see the speck in another's eye while missing the log in our eye."

Thus, the parable may speak less about who needs forgiveness and more about grace – humanity's response to God's generosity – for even when we don't know we need it – grace abounds.

To paraphrase the Christian existentialist philosopher & theologian, Paul Tillich, are we able to *accept the fact that we are accepted?*

### **[Slide – Train]**

A preacher sat inside her train cabin when a young adult entered and took the seat across from this preacher.

The preacher tried to strike up a conversation, but it became evident that conversation was not on the mind of his young man.

The two sat in silence.

After a while, the young traveler broke the silence by saying, "Thanks for trying to be polite and kind. I'm a little pre-occupied."

"Well," if you'd like, "I'm told I'm a good listener."

"It's just I'm a little scared right now. You see I left home about five years ago. I got into it pretty bad with my old-man. He said some things – I said some things – the last sound I heard was the front door slam as I took off."

I just called home last night and couldn't bring myself to speak to him when he answered so I held the phone up to my ear and breathed.

He said, “Hello. Hello. Hello. Is anybody there?”

Then he hung up.

I called right back.

This time, my mother answered.

I quickly said, “Hello.”

I told her I wanted to come home.

But I couldn’t come home unless I knew dad could forgive me.

So, she told me to take the train and that she’d let me know if it was okay by hanging a white sheet on the clothesline so that I could see it from the train window as we rounded the bend before the station.

You see our backyard faces this rail line.

We’ll be passing by the bend in a couple of minutes, and I just can’t look.

So, if you could do me a favor will you look at the house around the next bend and tell me if you see white sheet hanging from the line?

As the train rounded the bend, the preacher told this young man, “You’re going to want to see this.”

### **[Slide – Backyard Hanging Laundry]**

The young man slowly opened his eyes and saw white sheets hanging from the clothesline – white ribbons hanging from tree branches – white tablecloths and towels hanging from the second-floor bedroom windows – white tea towels hanging out the back kitchen window – white window curtains blowing through open porch windows – and his father standing in the yard waving a white sheet back and forth he’d tied to an old wooden flag pole.

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- May we take the time necessary to recognize and be changed by God's generosity which declares *grace abounds*.
- May we take the time necessary to recognize and be changed by God's generous grace which bids us *accept the fact that we are accepted*.
- May we take the time necessary to recognize, be changed, and celebrate with one another – and – with the God who declares to us *that which was lost has been found*.

May we come home – again ... & ... again ... & ... again ...

Amen & Amen.