

The Love that Waits
Luke 15

“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.”

God only knows who first heard Jesus tell these three parables. Luke imagines two distinct audiences within earshot: there were the tax collectors and sinners who had come to listen to Jesus; and there was the religious establishment who had come to critique him. It is as though Luke anticipated the gathered church on any given Sunday morning!

That day, according to Luke, as the critics grumbled about the company he was keeping, Jesus tells all of them three parables with curious odds. In the first, one of one hundred sheep was lost; in the second, one of ten coins was lost; in the third, one of two sons was lost. In the first two stories, the main characters—a shepherd and a woman—searched diligently, even frantically for the one that was lost. In the third parable, the father simply waits and watches. On this fourth Sunday in the season of Lent and in the middle of a series asking after the love that God is, the image of the shepherd who seeks the lost sheep *until he finds it*, and the image of the woman who searches the dirt floor of her home for a lost coin *until she finds it*, are both more compelling images of what love is and does than the image of the father who simply waits. Yet it is this third parable that invites us to discover something we have lost in our relationship to the love that waits.

Consider, first, what we know of this father’s love through his interaction with each son. With the younger son, the father acquiesces to Junior’s demand for his inheritance; for months, even years, he watches and waits for his return (this is no helicopter father!). When he spies him coming up the road, he has compassion (the Greek word means he feels from his bowels), runs, puts his arms around him, kisses him and tells the slaves to fete his son with a robe and a ring and a feast. Some would call him a permissive dad; others an unconditional lover.

With the older son, like the shepherd and the woman, the father seeks him out, but can only plead with him to come in the house. The elder son assumes the father to be a stern man who expects obedience and withholds praise. On this day, however, the father is almost tender: he assures this son of his presence and generosity; he reasons with him, saying, we had to celebrate and rejoice because this your brother was dead and is alive, was lost and is found. His only power is the power of persuasion. As Eduard Schweizer has said of him, he is the almighty, powerless father. Then he waits.

That is all he can do with both sons given the way that he loves. He cannot put his younger son on his shoulder rejoicing and take him home like the shepherd; he cannot drop the elder son in his pocket and take him to the party like the woman. Each son has a will. In the end, the father can only watch and wait for both of his lost sons to return.

Why does the father’s love his sons in this way? Why does God love us in this way? What comes immediately to mind are Karl Barth’s words about the patience of God. The patience that is deep-rooted in God’s essence, allows us, for the sake of God’s own grace and mercy, the space and the time to become who we are. God gives our lives a reality side by side with God’s own. He wills us to be who we are in such a way that God does not suspend or destroy our lives when we take a wrong turn, but accompanies and sustains and allows us to develop in freedom. Reading the parable backwards, the bottom-line of the father’s love for his sons is his complete self-giving—“you are always with me and all that I have is yours.” There are two ways to experience this love, each represented by one of the father’s sons.

There is a sense in which the younger son “gets this” about his father and takes it as license to do as he pleases with the space and time his father has freely given him. All that the son has is the father’s. Properly translated, the parable says that the father “divided between his sons *his life*.” The younger son “gathered all that he had,” went as far away from home as he could, and blew it on self-indulgent living.

Given the two previous parables, you cannot help but wonder why the father does not set out to rescue the son from his self-destructive behavior. Surely he knew his son’s character; surely he had the wherewithal to intervene, to search for the lost son until he found him. Surely God knows the same about us. How is it that the love of this father chooses not to do this: chooses to watch and wait for the son’s return? Could it be, as Barth says of God, that the father “is not more powerful in his action than in his forbearance from action”? Forbearing, he “waits patiently, giving [the son] every freedom and opportunity. The father’s love is so powerful that it can “wait, allowing [the son] to continue. The abyss in the heart of [the father] is so deep that in it the other, the reality of [the son] distinct from [the father], can be contained,” even in the face of all of his dissolute living.

So the father waits. He waits for the son to come home. And yet, there is another astonishing aspect to the father’s love. According to the parable, this homecoming is all the father wants. The son prepares a *mea culpa*, assuming that the father will want a confession laced with contrition. But the father is simply waiting for the son to be with him.

As it was with his handing over the inheritance, so it is with his receiving the son home: there are no conditions to his homecoming, no thought about punishment or payback. The love that waits is a love that receives all comers. Again to impute Barth's words about God to the father in the parable:

...there can be no question of disappointment or self-deception on the part of God with respect to the sincerely, or insincerely, of the human penitence for which He waits in His patience. God is not short-sighted, nor is He subject to any optimistic illusions,...He knows very well what is our frame. But because he knows it, he has good ground for being patient with us....

What, then, of the elder son? You can say that the elder son experiences the father's patience as disregard. He has assumed that the time and space the father has given him to develop his own existence reveals his father's indifference to his obedience or his goodness or his responsible living. Therefore he is literally a slave to his father's unspoken expectations. There is no joyful obedience in what he does day after day. No doubt he has watched the father's indulgence of his brother's behavior and, assuming that love is a zero sum game, concludes that there is nothing of the father's love or attention or affirmation left for him.

This is the son the father has lost. This is the son whose expectations of the father keep him from receiving the love that the father has for him. If the younger son thought he was testing the father's love by leaving, the elder son has been testing the father's love by remaining, by refusing the time and space his father's love has given him to develop his own existence, by silently critiquing the father who has not loved him as he ought to be loved. The scene between the elder son and the father may well be the first time the son has dared to speak his mind, to voice his harbored resentment at this father who has taken his faithful service for granted.

I repeat, this is the son the father has lost. This is the son whose expectations of the father keep him from receiving the love that the father has for him. All that the father can do is plead with him, comfort him, assure him...and then wait: months, years, even a lifetime. We do not know what happens in the end--until it dawns on us that we are the child whose return will make or break the father's heart.

We are the audience that Luke places within earshot of Jesus. Some of us here this morning are, indeed, tax collectors and sinners. We know what it is to take this life that we have been given, that belongs wholly to God, and squander it—if not on dissolute living, then on the respectable sort of self-indulgence that this society lauds. Perhaps you came to yourself not in the midst of losing it all, but when gaining it all left you empty, aimless, lost. Perhaps you have simply grown weary of living for yourself. With the tax collectors and sinners, you have come to hear of the love that has been nothing to you if not patient: the love that has waited for your return for years.

Then there are those of us who never really left home—and yet something in us has absented ourselves from the joy and delight that comes from being loved without condition by the One who has given us everything. We do not want the space and the time and the freedom to discover ourselves. Nor do we really want a God who waits in the wings or who wordlessly accompanies us. Give us a helicopter God who will intervene when and where and how we think God should. Give us a God who will recognize our goodness, our hard work, our accomplishments and reward us eternally. Moreover, if ever we were to speak our mind on this matter, we would give God a piece of our indignation: first concerning God's patience toward those who try God the most and then concerning God's absence in the lives of those who have been nothing but faithful. In a word, we are the critics in the crowd.

Now in each of these parables, there is a party thrown by the main character: by the shepherd celebrating the return of his lost sheep, by the woman celebrating the recovery of her lost coin, and by the father whose celebration of his youngest son's return will not be complete without the return of his eldest son.

God in Christ has come out of his home to watch for some to return from a far country and to plead with others who remain in the field pouting: Come to the feast, he says. The table is set. Some of us will come to receive the life he is giving us with the tears of a penitent, grateful that he does not ask where we have been or what we have done. Some of us will receive the life he is giving out of obligation or obedience, but as strangers to joy. Some of us will decline the invitation, thinking ourselves unworthy; others will overthink and so deny the actuality of the love that has awaited our return for years. No matter the reason. We are all within earshot of Christ's invitation this morning. Come to the feast, he says. All is ready. My dear flock: God has given me only words to seek for you. Know that as Advent is the season when we watch and wait for God's coming, surely Lent is the season when God watches and waits for our return. Thanks be to God.