

## **Letting Go – Lent 1 Prodigal Son Series**

### **February 26, 2012**

I set this table up for our Ash Wednesday service because it reminds me of family and throughout the season of Lent we are talking about one family in particular. It is the family of three, a father and two sons. And like most families, it was broken. Something was terribly wrong.

The story tells us just enough to make us wonder what the days were like that led up to that final blow out. Was the father a bad parent? Was he too soft? Did he work too much? Why do some children rage against their parents? Why do some kids have to practically ruin their lives before they come to their senses?

I wish I knew.

This is a story that some of you know too well. You helplessly watched as your child turned into someone you didn't know. You tried to set boundaries. You tried to remain calm. You tried tough love. You fanaticized about locking your child up through adolescence. You tried to reason with your child. You tried bribing your child. You tried counseling. You tried medication. You tried it all....and so did your child.

Drinking, smoking, cutting, sex, drugs, vandalism, stealing, lying, violence, rage, suicide attempts, reckless driving, defiance, disrespect, truancy, treatment, depression, abuse, exposing too much on Facebook, arrests... I've lived it and I know many of you have as well.

It is gut-wrenching and heart-breaking. You lay awake at night with your emotions vacillating from anxiety to anger. You question yourself. You think about what you can try next. You run scenarios through your head of the ditch your child is laying in, or the party she is at, or the prison cell she will ultimately occupy, if she lives that long. You try to think of ways you can outsmart him; motion sensors, squeaky doors, parental controls, GPS tracking. You wish he knew what this was doing to you. You wish she knew how much you loved her and hated her at the same time. You watch every dream you had for this child slip away. You are devastated.

It seems like some kids are wired for rebellion and others for compliance. I have twin uncles. One grew up to be a church-going, married-to-one-woman, high school principal. The other one was married five times, spent time in jail, and propped up a bar stool for recreation. Sometimes there is no rhyme or reason. You love them both – it's just that one causes more heartache than the other.

So this father had two sons. The younger son was no longer satisfied living at home and working for his father. He wanted to be with his friends, have fun, and be his own boss. So he went to his father and demanded his share of his father's estate. It was cold and heartless. It was like he was wishing his father was dead. It was like saying, "I don't love you – I love your money." It was the final blow. This father did what he had

to do to divide his land and sell a portion of it off. He gave the money to his son, knowing what his son would do with it, and he did the unthinkable. He let him go.

He let him go to squander his inheritance. He let him go to make foolish mistakes with potentially deadly consequences. He let him go.

I listened to an interview on Friday of someone who works for the American Camping Association. He was talking about the importance of letting your child go to a sleep over camp, beyond the bounds of parental protection. He spoke for a moment about parents who feel like bad parents if they cannot be there to protect them from all harm. Then he went on to talk about how crippling it can be to a child if a parent never lets go. In twenty years of directing Junior Camp, I watched many a parent sit in their cars, trying to find the courage to drive away.

The father let him go. And that is never an easy thing to do. There was no guarantee he would ever see him again.

There are some who want to call this story the parable of the loving father. Is letting go an ever an act of love?

In the story of the Garden of Eden, God gave the humans a choice. They could choose God or not choose God. Why did God give them a choice? It seems like God could have saved us all a world of heartache if God had not given us so much freedom. We are free to choose God or walk away and do our own thing. If God had not given us a choice could we really say God loved us? If God loves us and desires our love in return, that cannot happen unless God gives us the freedom to not love.

In other words, God gives us the freedom to reject God. Some of us do this by rebelling against God and thinking we know better, like the younger son.

While we may not know everything there is to know about God – we do know that rejection hurts. We do have some comprehension of what it is like to watch someone self-destruct.

We want God to come to our rescue over and over again and God wants us to come to our senses.

German theologian, Helmut Thielicke wrote a book called, *The Waiting Father*. The waiting father never stops longing for his child to come home. The waiting father never stops loving. He doesn't go find his son and drag him home, he waits.

One graduation Sunday I asked folks in the congregation to share what they remembered from their high school graduation. Joe Hill spoke up and he said, "You always have a home to come home to."

We have a church slogan, even put it on t-shirts. Disciples of Christ – Sharing the journey. We talk quite a bit about the life of faith is a journey and we are all at different places in that journey. We gather together to encourage each other on the journey. We go out and invite other to join the journey. We are on a journey – does anyone know where we are going?

Home. We are going home – back to the loving arms of a waiting parent.

It's a beautiful image yet painful image – the father letting go. All you see is the son's back and the look of longing in the father's face. It is the face of love. It is the face of God.

Some of the folks listening to Jesus tell this story had never seen this face. They had no idea. They were told by religious leaders they were not welcome, they were not worthy, they were not clean. To which Jesus says, "You always have a home to come home to."