

4 Lent  
March 30, 2025

In the name of the God of all creation,  
the God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And in the power of God, made known in the Spirit. Amen

Sermon by Rev. Jerry LiaBraaten

### A Jesus Kind Of Love

I'd like to begin with a few questions. Today's gospel reading is all about family, a father and two brothers...siblings. So, first of all, I'm wondering. Were any of you the baby in your family? Are you an only child? How about the eldest child? If you had siblings, did the youngest receive special treatment--privileges the others didn't get? Secondly, the word 'love' gets tossed around very loosely these days, what are some of the different ways you've heard it used, e.g. "I love my car...I love your shoes...I love pizza, and so on. With these thoughts in mind, let's begin...

When I was in college I sang in a choir that did a concert tour every year. After our concerts we would either be put up in a hotel for the night or in host homes. One night--a host-home night--when I saw who my roommate David and I were going home with, a red flag immediately went up. You see, I knew that when everyone got back on the bus the next morning we'd compare host homes...the cars they drove, the neighborhoods they lived in, the size of their homes, how rich we thought they were. (I know, I was terribly immature!) That first flag went up because our hosts (a mother and her 16 year old son) weren't dressed, well, very nicely. The second flag went up when we got in their car--a beat up, rusted out Toyota Corolla that we and our luggage barely fit in. The third flag shot up when we got to their house--because it wasn't a house. It was just a two-bedroom apartment--a tiny, modestly decorated one at that. David and I exchanged glances, reading each other's minds, "Wait till we tell our friends!" Like I said, I was terribly immature! But wait, there's more.

We enjoyed snacks at the kitchen table then got ready for bed. It wasn't until then we learned that David was going to sleep in the mother's bedroom and I was going to sleep in the son's room. This meant she was going to sleep on the couch and her son on the floor. We objected as vigorously and respectfully as we could (I wasn't a complete jerk back then.) until the son said, "Well, you see...we just really wanted you to come."

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In general we're all taught it's not a good idea to read into things. Pretty much anything. Especially into things that people say and do. And it's especially bad to do so and then share our spin on what we heard or saw. That kind of behavior frequently leads to gossip. And gossiping is even worse than reading into things, right?! Now I know, when you have some juicy little tidbit of information that you

know just where to land for maximum impact, it's hard not to give into gossip. It reminds of the person who said, "I make it a point to never repeat gossip...so listen carefully the first time!"

But today we have an exception to the rule about reading into things. It's called a parable, The Parable of the Prodigal Son, and parables are teaching stories. In other words, they are *made* to be read into. In fact, the more we read into them the more we get out of them. And, the more deeply we understand them, the more deeply we understand ourselves and each other.

Before we dive into this one there's something we need to clarify. It has to do with this word 'love'. As we discussed earlier, we define it very broadly so we can apply it to many different contexts. But Jesus, here, offers a narrower definition which, when understood, offers a much more expansive understanding of the word 'love' than all others.

We often use the term 'unconditional love' to describe the special love God has for us. But there's a problem with that description. According to Jesus (as he reveals in this parable) love, by definition, is unconditional. To put in another way, that 'unconditional' quality is precisely what makes love...love! It sets love apart from any other word. To come at this idea from the opposite direction, if there is something called 'unconditional love' then there also has to be something called 'conditional love', right? But conditional love means there are conditions that must be considered, requirements that must be met, compliance and conformance to a predetermined set of expectations and all that.

That's not love!!!

Jesus presents us with a new understanding of love, then, through this parable...a parable with three stories in one. The father's story, the younger son's story, and the elder son's story. Each has something to teach us about this Jesus kind of love.

In the case of the father, there are so many words to describe him...generous, forgiving, patient, loving, compassionate, selfless..and that's just a start. If we were to sum all of them up into a single word that word, ironically, would be, 'prodigal'. You see, the word prodigal actually means 'lavish, extravagant, overflowing and with abandon.' Here's the irony...that a long time ago someone labeled this story The Parable of the Prodigal Son--using the word 'prodigal' to describe the son rather than the father. That name stuck and to this day it's the title most commonly used title. But it really should be called The Parable of the Prodigal Father...or maybe better yet, The Parable of Prodigal Love. The fact that it isn't, that the word prodigal is used to describe the son's sins rather than the father's grace, is worthy of a study in human nature all by itself!

In the case of the younger son, again, there are numerous words worthy of describing this Jesus kind of love at work in his life. I want to focus on just one: clarity. The story tells us that he "came to his senses." In other words, the love of God that Jesus is talking about here helped him break through the confusion and chaos he'd brought upon himself. He made an about face and, duly humbled and newly emboldened, he courageously faced his own music...and his father.

Now I have to ask you, when was the last time you came to your senses? When was the last time you broke through the fog of some self-inflicted crisis in your life, made a life-transforming decision that required you to make an about face, get up, dust yourself off, and courageously head off in a new direction? If you did, when you did--and whether you knew it at the time or not until later--the clarifying love of God that prompted the younger son's change of heart came to you, too.

Finally, in the case of the elder son, we learn something about this uniquely defined love by observing what happens to us in its absence. We're told the elder son was more than mildly upset with everything he heard from one of his father's slaves. He was angry, hateful, self-serving, disrespectful, malicious, judgmental and vindictive. That's not love by any definition.

Now here's the hard question: Did he have a legitimate argument?

My answer? A qualified 'yes'. Qualified by its context--and here's the context: He grew up in--and all he'd ever known--was a cultural value system based on merit. In a merit-based value system, our worth comes from our productivity, our conformity, our adherence to accepted norms of the day, our loyalty to the reigning powers that be. Like the elder son, we, too, have grown up in such a system. It's how the world has chosen to work. In fact, politically speaking, whether you are a Republican or Democrat or something in between, I think you'd have to agree that our current administration is taking the idea of a merit-based value system to a whole new level--beginning with redefining a person's merit or worth in an increasingly exclusive way--a way that is abandoning more and more people--around the world--for the sake of a very privileged, select and powerful few. That's not love either.

We may think the greatest challenge the parable presents us with is this: How to love with this prodigal, clarifying, and truly unconditional love in a world that lives and breaths by a conditional definition of love. I agree, this is a challenge, but it's not the greatest one.

We may think the greatest challenge we face is that, as fellow participants in a merit-based cultural value system like the elder son was, we have much more in common with him than we want to admit--and that, just as it was for him, it is our default system of doing life. I agree, facing this truth is also a challenge, but it's not the greatest one.

No, the greatest challenge you and I face is realizing that we are loved with the same extravagant, lavish, all-encompassing love that the younger son came to clarity about--and then, getting up, dusting ourselves off and courageously stepping into the world with this new, transformed and transforming love and use its power face down every other challenge out there.

Why is this the greatest challenge?

Dr. Marie-Louise von France was a student of the famous Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. Then she was his assistant. Eventually she became a world-renowned scholar on Jungian psychology. In an interview she was asked how people could deal with their shadows (our "alter-ego," that often uncontrollable dark side--the evil Mr. Hyde as opposed to the good Dr. Jekyll in us). She responded, "Think of a person

you really don't like, then take a sheet of paper and write down all the things you don't like about him or her. Be as specific as possible. Then, at the bottom of the page, write two words..."That's me!"

By the way, Jesus suggested the same when he said, "Take the log out of your own eye so you can clearly see the speck in your neighbor's." (Mt 7:5)

You and I need this Jesus kind of love so we can face not just the world but ourselves. We need this love that unconditionally embraces us, so we feel safe and secure and grounded while we let it at the time free us from ourselves and our shadows. Love that humbles our egos while enabling us to see through life's inevitable confusion and chaos with clarity. Love that disarms us, removing all our defenses, while empowering us to risk doing what we know in our hearts must be done.

Our greatest challenge is doing what the younger son ultimately did, that is, accepting this prodigal love for ourselves, believing we are worthy of it and then living our lives accordingly--not just professing it but actually, truly living it and using this love to face down any and every challenge that presents itself.

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I fell asleep that night with the words of the 16 year old boy on my mind. When I woke up the next morning I wanted to be just like him. I got back on the bus and I could hear the usual banter and gossip coming from my friends all around me. But something had changed in me. And I didn't chime in with them. I couldn't do it. That's what God's prodigal love does. It's the Jesus kind of love.