

*Jesus came to change our minds about God*

**Luke 15:11-32**

<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus said, ‘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 travelled 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 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>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 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.” ’

I shared with a few of you that last Sunday, after I sat down, it hit me that this whole series on *God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit* has made me feel a bit vulnerable – it has made me feel a bit exposed. I think the difference is that usually I talk in story and metaphor – and in fact, I think that is how we should talk about God – in metaphor and allegory, as this is probably the best we can do – we recognize that we are never actually talking about God, but trying to get close, trying to describe our experiences of God or ways we think about God. These are not God – they are just our best thoughts and best attempts at speaking of God. As the old hymn says, “thou my best thought by day or by night.”

But this series has pushed me beyond that a bit, to speak not as much in story and metaphor, but attempting to actually pin down or articulate in a few concrete way some elements of who I believe God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit to be. Thus, my increasingly long preambles to start each sermon.

So, this week, instead of a long preamble I am just going to 1) name this reality, that I am feeling a little extra vulnerable and exposed in sharing some of this. And 2) say that, even as I am stating something as my view or belief, it is still essentially a metaphor for God – I am relaying an image of who I am finding the God of Jesus Christ to be – though, this is not God, they are simply my metaphorical words trying to point to God.

My original intent was to spend only one Sunday of Jesus, as in our church he probably gets most of our preaching time the rest of the year, but I didn't quite feel that I was done with Jesus after one sermon – or, what is more likely, he was not done with me. So, I will again

attempt to humbly offer a view on Jesus that has been shaping me these past years: **that Jesus came to change *our* minds about God.**

Sometimes, you may notice that I use the phrase, “the God we meet in Jesus Christ.” This is what I am trying to get at today,” the God we meet in Jesus Christ.” In that somewhat cumbersome and very intentional phrase, I mean to say that the God we know is the God that Jesus reveals to us – that the God that Christians claim to follow, is the God that we meet in the person of Jesus Christ. Who is that? Who is the God of Jesus Christ? “Who Jesus is,” says Herbert McCabe, “Is God’s ideas of God.” Or, as the gospel of *John* calls him, “The Word of God.” Jesus then, being the Word of God, is our best idea of who God is – our clearest picture of God. While we can say that there are many reasons that Jesus came to live and teach among us, one of those reasons, I believe, was to change *our* minds about God.

We think about God choosing some of us – to us, apparently, this seems like something God would do. In searching for a reason to why we are here on earth, one of the answers we determined was to sort out who were the chosen and who were the less than chosen. Throughout history we have determined the “chosenness” of people in a variety of ways:

- by race or ethnicity – whether you were Jew or Gentile, Hebrew or Cannanite, American or non-American
- by right living – strictly following the Law of Moses, of keeping all clean, pure, and separate
- by right belief – do you believe the correct prescribed things

- and so on and so on.

Some believe that this “chosenness” was predetermined before you or I even took our first breath; others believe it up to us whether we become part of the chosen; and still others believe that there is a finite number of chosen ones, some think it is only 144,000 – for all of history, less chosen people than currently live in our city of Boise.

*Jesus, came to do many things, but I think one thing that Jesus came to do was to change our minds about that.*

The most common way we think about God in western Christianity, is God as ultimate judge – that determining who is and is not chosen – that this is God’s ultimate and most important role. I think Jesus wanted to greatly expand this narrow idea of God, to let us know that God is much, much more.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus attempts to show us what God we worship – to show us who God is. Herbert McCabe calls God, “the eternal explosion of love which is at once Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit.” Hear that again, God as “the eternal explosion of love.” Maybe that is what we should say instead of “Big Bang” when we talk about the beginning event of our universe, not that it all started with a “Big Bang”, but with “an eternal explosion of love.”

When we fail to see and experience God's love, this “changes God into a projection of our guilt, so that we don't see the real God at all; all we see is some kind of judge.”<sup>1</sup> We turn God into a paymaster, into a boss – one who will give the payment of what has been earned.

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert McCabe’s sermon on ‘The Forgiveness of God’ in his book *Faith Within Reason*.

And in our society that is built upon competition, we continue to have a view that God will in some way reward the winners and punish the losers. *Jesus, came to change our minds about that.*

And this, I think, is one of the purposes of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, to help change our minds about God:

We have a home and a parent (in this story, a father); there are two children (in this case, two sons). In this house there is a community of love and friendship that has been created which holds the family together. Except that *the younger son rejects this* – the younger son rejects defining himself by and in this community of love, and he opts out. He asks for his inheritance, choosing his own self-interest and his own possessions. We might say that the younger son chooses to value *the gifts* of the father more than *the love* of the father.

It should not be lost on us that in asking a parent for our inheritance while they are still living, it is – especially in the historical time this parable was first told – the equivalent of telling your parent you wish they were dead, or you would at least be okay with it.

So, the younger son heads out, “he will make his own way as a *free man*, free from the constrictions of considering others,” free from the constrictions of how his father has ordered things to run in the household, free from labor. And because of this he finds himself in a far country where things are not bound together by love and friendship, but by contracts and convergence of self-interests.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert McCabe and Brian Davies, *God Still Matters* (London: Continuum, 2002), 238-242.

And, as the story goes, after a losing it all, after having only the food of the pigs to eat, he sees himself for what he is – he has an awakening in his low-point and says, ‘I am no longer worthy to be called your child; treat me as one of your hired servants.’ What the sin of this son has done is to alter his whole relationship with his father/parent; instead of believing he is a child, he now believes he should be treated as one who gets wages, as one who gets only exactly what he deserves.

Going out into the world of competition and self-interest has warped his view of his father, it has warped his view of himself – he has come to see himself no longer as a beloved child, but only as one is worthy of what he is able to earn; that, if he is lucky, his father will pay him what he earns from this point forward.

Or, as McCabe would say, “sin is something that changes God into a projection of our guilt, so that we don’t see the real God at all; all we see is some kind of judge.” And this is not just personal sin, this is important here, it is not just when you or I do something wrong that messes with our view to see God and our own sense of belovedness. It is our corporate sin, our societal sin – living in a world of competition, what we call the “dog-eat-dog-world” – what we call “Capitalism” or “Socialism” or “Totalitarianism” – living in a world of ‘isms’ misshapes and malforms us until we are no longer able to see “the eternal explosion of love”, and instead we see “an eternal judge.”

Now, part of why we might say this about this parable – that sin has warped the younger son’s view of God – is because it happens a second time. In case we miss it, we have a chance to hear it again in the second son. The older son and the younger son have the same view of their father.

Our more traditional view of this story has been: 1) God welcomes us back, no matter how bad things get for us. And 2) If we, like the older brother, have tried to live the straight narrow life, don't be a jerk – don't be stingy with your acceptance and celebration when someone turns things around and comes home. This is a fine reading of this parable, however, what it is missing are the ways that both the younger and older son *have the same view of their father* – they both believe that their father will treat them according to what they have earned – they both believe in a father who, in the end, will hand out only what has been earned based on merit.

The older son says, “I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command.” Even though he is law-abiding and not full of corruption and like his brother, he too does not see his father for who he is. His life of hard work and holiness has formed him to only see himself as a wage-earner. He too thinks that he should get what he deserves and that his Father will give him what is owed. He wants his full pay – he wants what he deserves. And so, Jesus presents us here with the careful and dutiful law-abiding son who is so concerned with his own merits and virtues and accomplishments that he too cannot see God. He also sees a projection of his own thoughts – a projection of his own sense of eternal justice.

- Sometimes the true God is hidden from us by easy pleasures and escapes.
- Sometimes God is hidden from us by our belief in our own hard-work and ego.
- Sometimes the God of Jesus Christ is hidden from us by our personal failings and missteps – from ways we personally hurt ourselves, others or another part of God's creation.
- And sometimes the God of Jesus Christ is hidden from us by the systems we have been born into – the systems of competition, the systems of hierarchy, the systems that tell us we are worth what we contribute, that we are worth what we earn, that we are more-or-less worthy than others.

All these cause us to see God as a projection of these systems and failings instead of seeing the eternal explosion of love.

All of these cause us to see a God whose mind we have to change about us. That if we say we are sorry enough times, or if we believe the exact right things, or if we say the exact right prayer, or if we live a holy enough life – then, God will change God’s mind about us. *If, if, if, if* – then God the Judge will have mercy on us and extend us God’s love. But, God never changes God’s mind about you. God is simply in love with you. What God does again and again is change your mind about God.<sup>3</sup> This is what the Word of God reveals to us about God.

The God we meet in Jesus Christ is represented in the father of this parable, the father who sees us when we are still far off, and runs to put his arms around us and kiss us. The father of this story does not wait to hear his son say anything – for all he knows the son could be back to ask for more money – but before even one word is out of the son’s mouth the father is running, is hugging, is kissing – this same son who essentially said, ‘I wish you were dead.’ It was not the return of the son that changed the father from being vengeful to being loving – this father has been waiting in love.

And to the older son, the father pleads with him: “Do not see me this way. Do not see yourself this way. Do not be upset that my ways are not your ways – but see that this explosion and uncomprehensible love is something to be celebrated! Do not see yourself for what you have

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert McCabe’s sermon on ‘The Forgiveness of God’ in his book *Faith Within Reason*.

accomplished, or what you do, or what people say about you. See that you are a child born and living in my unending love. Just like your brother – just like your sister.”

“You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.”

*All that is mine is yours.*

This is the God we meet in Jesus Christ. Of course, there is more to this God – there are implications of this love – there are things that this love calls us to. But at the most basic level, this is who the Word of God tells us God is, an eternal explosion of love.

Or, “The whole of our faith is the belief that God loves us; I mean there isn't anything else. Anything else we say we believe is just a way of saying that God loves us.”

This is, at this point in my life of faith, the best understanding I have of God. May our understanding of the fullness of God continue to grow in depth and breadth – that this great and eternal love might flow through us and into the world. Amen and amen.