

“Wasted Love”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “A STRANGE PATH TO GLORY”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Luke 15:10-32 [NRSV]

¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A 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. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” ²⁰So 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. ²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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 have to tell you I am angry this morning. I’m angry with charming, manipulative people who care

nothing for others. I’m tired of watching young people who “know it all” decide that the old hometown and the old

homestead is a drag and want daddy to fund their escape. Didn't we have enough of that in the sixties and seventies when we wanted to go out and "find ourselves" or "do our own thing" no matter what difficulty it caused others?

And most pastors try to make out like this boy's little speech is his "repentance." I think it was just another "plan" to get what he wanted. I think it was another ploy to avoid the consequences of his behavior. Of course, he had already suffered some consequences. He had mortgaged his potential future as an independent soul. He had suffered hunger and evidently his pay for rolling around with pigs didn't even cover food. In addition, he had sullied his faith by feeding pigs to just to keep a roof over his head.

I'm also angry because I am sick of "Bible-toting hypocrites" which is what the older brother appears to be to me. He's all about the rules and he knows that his younger brother has failed to keep them. He, however, has obeyed and kept the family code and been a "good little boy" all his life. He watched in dismay as little brother took half the value of the family holdings and went off and wasted them. In doing this, his father has effectively handed over the family farm to the older son. Now, the younger son has come back and older brother has to support the three of them on half the assets he had before because the younger son took them and spent them having a grand old time in Vegas.

But most of all, I am angry at this coddling, indulgent father. In today's terms he is an enabler. Instead of

holding those boys accountable he gives in to both their whims and lets them get away with anything. He brings shame and dishonor on himself the way he acts toward them and they act toward him. Instead of "tough love" he runs out to greet the younger son welcoming him back before he even hears the "repentance" speech the younger son has worked up. He goes out to the older son the same way, begging him, giving up all dignity and honor asking him to join the party for his long lost brother. The older brother, the "good" one, ends up costing his father just as much heartburn, just as much indignity and public shame, as the younger brother. He just didn't leave home to do it. This father is guilty of wasting love on two people who couldn't deserve it less.

Maybe that's the point. Truth is, none of us deserve the love God wastes on us. The good news is we don't have to deserve it and that is good news because we *can't* deserve it or earn it, not even the forgiveness that we need so desperately. God doesn't just put a "Welcome Home" mat at the front door and wait. God goes out seeking those who have lost their way. We may think we are seekers. We think we are the ones trying to find God, but God is always trying to find us.

Annie Dillard, tells in her book about her life growing up in Pittsburgh. By the age of fifteen she'd read through all the books in the Library near her home. And reading those books she decided that all this religion stuff is bunk and God doesn't really exist. So she took it upon herself at age fifteen to show up

at Shadyside Presbyterian Church and tell her aging pastor, “I want my name off the roll. I don’t believe in God anymore.”

The pastor said, “Okay.”

Annie Dillard said, “You’re not going to try to argue me out of it?”

And he said, “No, no, no. You’re too smart for me. There’s no way I could argue you back in.”

So she said, “I want my name off the roll.”

He said, “It’s off the roll.”

She walked out of the minister’s office and on her way down the hall she heard him mutter to himself out loud, “She’ll be back.” She wheeled around, went back into the office and she said, “What did you say?”

He said, “Oh, I said I presumed that you’ll probably be back.”

And she said, “Look, this is my life. I live my life like I want to live my life. I’m not coming back!”

Well, Annie Dillard wrote in her life story, “As I write this I’m 48 years old and I’m back.”

William Willimon says, “You see, when we’re telling the story of us and God, we’ve got to talk about the God that came to us in Jesus Christ, the one that doesn’t leave it all up to us. It’s not over between us and God until God says it’s over. God is not the one who sets up the rules and puts out the standards and says, ‘Now here’s the bar. Chin up to it if you can.’ No, God is the one that seeks and searches and finds.... Thank God our

relationship to God is not all up to us. Thank God that we not only have a God that loves us as we are, but seeks us out where we are.” He adds, “if you’re trying to get away from God all I’ve got to say about that is as you go through your life, keep looking over shoulder.”

He says that we may think, “God is large, distant—very, very distant—up there, out there somewhere. God is the one that got the world started and set up certain natural laws. The world is functioning just fine, thank you, and then God retired. Well, Jesus speaks of a God who seeks and searches and finds.”¹ But these passages are set against the question of why Jesus hangs out with sinners and eats with outcasts. He says there is great, great joy in heaven when God finds someone lost.

I guess the truth is that I am angry because I see so much of myself in both these boys. I have wasted God’s love. Maybe you can see it in your life too. I can think of at least three or four ways I have wasted God’s love. See if it sounds at all like you.

I have been tempted at times to believe that what God has given me is all mine. I guess this hits me when I read stories on line like I did this week. It was in response to the fact that yet again our state government is going to cut education spending. In the online stories they let people write responses. I read these and most of the time they just make me more angry. Like the person who

¹ William Willimon, “God on the Prowl,” 30GoodMinutes.org, Program #5316, January 24, 2010.

wrote about how he or she didn't have kids so he or she shouldn't have to pay taxes for schools. "Let the ones who had the kids pay for the schools," this enlightened soul raved. I thought, that is the exact problem with this country today. Too many people are only thinking about themselves. Too many people act as if what they have really is THEIRS and THEIRS alone. I figure, if that is the correct attitude then I shouldn't have to pay to support Veteran's Benefits or the GI Bill. I never served and none of my children ever served in the military. Or maybe I should take it a step further and say I shouldn't have to pay taxes to support the military since I don't have any family members in the military. This "genius" needs to ask him or herself if they think having educated children benefits them in any way before they start sharing their ignorance. People ask why I get involved in issues of justice. Why do I spend so much time working with ICARE to improve our community? Because God has taught me to think about the welfare of others even if it doesn't directly benefit me. Because God has taught me that all that I have isn't mine – it is a gift from God and it is my responsibility to see that I use it to bless others the way I have been blessed. Otherwise I am no better than that younger son.

But I also know I can be like that older brother too. I can be too judgmental, and lest I be too harsh on that unknown soul I have criticized for his or her selfish attitude, let me say, I admit that I have wasted a lot of time not

forgiving people who have hurt me or done me wrong. I have let those people rent space in my heart and my mind and I have spent way too much time resenting the pain they have caused me and resenting them. So I have learned from God that instead of spending my time being like that older brother out on the fence line refusing to party that I am wasting God's love.

Instead, when I am tempted to resent or hate or spend time hurting over something I am going to pray for God's love to wash over them. Then I am going to go celebrate all that God's love has done for me. This is not selfish. This is honoring God. This is acknowledging that God is in charge of his honor, not me. I am going to rejoice in God's love rather than spend time in anger and judgment. I am going to let God choose to love and forgive the one who has wronged God or me. Now, the challenge here is to be clear that as an older brother, it is not my job to protect God's honor. If God wants to waste his love on good-for-nothing boys like his younger son, it is not my job to "hold the line." It is my job to celebrate what God has done for me and for all creation. But I have to confess, I still get angry at times.

Maybe I shouldn't be so angry. After all, if a father like that is willing to waste his love on two loser sons like them, maybe God is willing to keep wasting his love me. And if God is willing to waste his love me, maybe God is willing to keep wasting his love on you, too. AMEN.