

KINGDOM OF GRACE

Series: Stories Jesus Told
July 26, 2015
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Jesus, Parables, Prodigal Son, Loving Father
Luke 15:12-24, Ephesians 2:8

Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is the diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of El Liberal which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement.

All named Paco.

These opening lines from Ernest Hemingway's *The Capital of the World* serve to remind us of the power of a story. In one long sentence, Hemingway tells the tale of a boy named Paco, estranged from his father - separated - and of a Father so desperate to find his son and to forgive him that he takes out an ad in the paper. But in this potential reunification story, there is a sad reality. Because for every 1 Paco who gets to reunite with his Papa, there are 799 who *seek* reconciliation, but don't find it.

One sentence. One powerful story.

This morning, we're going to start a new series called *Stories Jesus Told* and over the next several weeks, we're going to look specifically at the stories Jesus told about this thing called the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is one of those things that's kind of hard to understand - difficult to grasp - but then once you do grasp it, you discover that it's everywhere. It's all through the bible and it's woven into the fabric of our lives.

When we talk about the Kingdom of God around here, what we're talking about is a dynamic reality that is the future reign of God breaking into the present through the life and ministry of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the people of God. Now, that might not clear it up much for you, so let me say it another way.

This weekend, Kenya is the Kingdom of Obama. Now, Barack Obama is not the recognized ruler here, but when Obama enters into Kenyan space, there is something more than just a guy coming for a visit. When Obama comes to Kenya, he brings people and vehicles and aircraft and security and military forces. For a few days here in Kenya, Obama is in charge. Kenyan officials are taking orders from American officials. The Kingdom of Obama has broken through into Kenya.

Likewise, on this earth, God doesn't fully reign. Though he should, he doesn't. And because he doesn't, there's brokenness and pain and difficulty that God never intended for us. But sometimes, in some places, in certain ways, we get a glimpse of what life would be like if God *did* rule. Like Obama flying into Jomo Kenyatta, sometimes God breaks into our world with a taste of his Kingdom. It's been said we live in the "now and not yet" of the Kingdom. Some stuff, we get to experience here and now. Other things, we don't get to experience yet. But Jesus told us that the Kingdom of God is near - meaning we can experience *more* of that incredible life in the kingdom if we choose to pursue it.

But still, even with my incredible, thoroughly contemporary and relevant example, you might find yourself asking, "Wait, so what is the Kingdom of God again?"

Well, I've got good news for you. You aren't alone. The people hanging out around Jesus didn't really understand it either. And so, Jesus just kept talking about it - kept telling stories about the Kingdom of God. And we're fortunate enough to have a bunch of those stories recorded. So, over the next several weeks, we'll be looking at these stories and asking the question over and over, "So, what is the Kingdom of God again?"

This morning, we're going to look at one of Jesus' most well-known stories. Like the Paco story, it involves a father, a son, and the kind of reconciliation that can only come through the gift of grace. And what we'll discover is this foundational truth that the Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of Grace.

But first, let me pray that God will open our eyes, ears, and hearts to what he has for us this morning.

Prayer

The interesting thing about the stories Jesus told is that, by and large, they didn't make a whole lot of sense. When I was a kid, it was explained to me that these parables, which is what these stories are sometimes called, were "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning," and that they were really a way for Jesus to simplify and explain some really complex God stuff.

And that sounds great...until you actually read the stories. Because when you read the stories...they don't make a lot of sense. In fact, most of the time, after Jesus told one of his parables - one of his stories - the guys who were his closest friends and followers - the disciples - are like, "Dude, what on earth were you talking about." And sometimes he would explain it to them so they could get it. But he told them, "Look, I speak in parables because if I spoke plainly, then people might hear and understand and then they would be saved." (Now, we wouldn't want that, would we?)

But no, you see, Jesus approaches truth differently that most of us do. He tells these stories not to give people all the answers, but instead, so that people will walk away with *questions* - he wants to make them think - to challenge their suppositions and preconceived notions of God and the world. He tells these stories so that the Kingdom of God becomes the topic of conversation in town the rest of the day. That's much more fun than just giving people the "right answers" isn't it?

And one of the stories Jesus told - one that was thoroughly confusing to his audience, but that tells us so much about God and the Kingdom of God and how that all works, was this story in Luke, chapter 15 that goes like this:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

Luke 15:11-24

Understand, there's a lot going on here, and I'll get to that in a minute, but if you don't take anything else away from this story, hear this: The Kingdom of God is a place where no matter who you are or what you've done, the father, God, is waiting to welcome you home and will run out to meet you, throw his arms around you, and throw a party for you. This Kingdom is a Kingdom of Grace!

Now grace is a funny thing. C.S. Lewis said:

"Forgiveness is a lovely idea until you have someone to forgive." - C.S. Lewis

Some of you have heard me put it like this: Everybody wants grace for themselves but justice for others.

We want to be given the benefit of the doubt, don't we? We want to be forgiven. We want to receive grace. But it's a lot harder to *offer* grace to others. It's a lot harder to *give* grace than it is to receive it.

But you know, if you stick around here for any amount of time, you're going to hear this over and over and over again. If I was forced to only talk about one topic every Sunday for the rest of my life, this is the one I would pick - grace. Because grace is the absolute foundation required for understanding anything about God, about the bible, about what the church is supposed to be. If you don't get grace, you can't get God.

The Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:8

In other words, God has given you this gift of grace - a fundamental element in your relationship with him - he's *given* it to you, it's a *gift*, so that nobody can say, "Yeah, here's why I deserve to be here." But also so no one can look around and say, "What's he doing here?" "How in the world did she get in here?" "They don't belong here." "He's not *one of us*."

There's a part of this story that Jesus told that I don't have time to get into today, but I would encourage you to look at Luke 15, starting in verse 25. If you're the kind of person who, like, you grew up in church, you've always served in church, you're a missionary, or whatever. Take a look at Luke 15, starting in verse 25, because there's something in there for you, too. And it is, in a nutshell, a warning for you about the consequences of *not* extending grace to others. So, go check that out later.

But right now, I want to tell a story. It's actually a story inside a story. And it's a story about a guy named Carl

I have, a couple of times in my life, had the privilege to speak this guy - his name is Carl Medearis. And Carl is an incredible guy - he's all about Jesus, and he's all about sharing the stories and the love of Jesus with just about everybody he talks to. But the thing about Carl is that some of the people he talks to are not your typical dinner guests. You'll see what I

mean. So, I heard Carl tell a story recently, and I'm just going to give it to you as I heard it. I'm not Carl, but I'll try to do the story justice. He says...

So, we were in the home of the Hezbollah leader - he lives in south Lebanon. The Hezbollah is a Shiite Lebanese organization - they're terrorists if you live on one side of the border, they're heroes if you're on the other side of the border. I was in his home - I take trips like this often. We had some political leaders, we had some business leaders, we had some pastors - about 12 of us with him, and we had spent about two and a half hours at that point talking about Jesus with these guys as we always do. It goes well, as it usually does, and he was sharing some things - we were reading the scriptures together and we were just kind of closing up in prayer and so we gathered around him, laid our hands on him and starting praying for him.

As we're praying, the Hezbollah TV station walks in. Hezbollah TV is called Al-Manar and it actually goes all around the Arab world - about 300 million people watch this. And Hezbollah TV comes in - the guy with the camera, the guy with the microphone, the guy with the light stand - and they see us praying and laying hands on the Hezbollah leader and they kind of are surprised - wondering if we were trying to kill him or something.

And they stopped very quietly when they realized we were praying and they just paused, and when we were done praying, they came up and asked the Hezbollah leader, "Could we interview the governor," that was with us. And the governor looked at me and said, "Do I want to be on Hezbollah TV?" And I said, "Sure! You won't be in politics anymore, but you can do whatever you want!" So he said, "Maybe I better not."

So the Hezbollah leader says, "Just interview Carl. He'll do it. He always does that," and I've done it quite a few times, and so I said, "Sure!" So, I'm just sitting there, the guy with the microphone comes up, and he goes like this [pointing the mic in my face], the flashing light goes on on the camera, and the guy with the light's holding the light. (I found out later it was a live feed. I didn't know that at the time. It would have been nice to know that little detail.) He says, "We're here with Mr. Carl and his delegation, and Mr. Carl, we'd just like to ask you two questions: Please tell us why you love the Hezbollah and why you hate Israel."

Now, you don't all know me, but just in case you're wondering, I don't love the Hezbollah organization and I don't hate Israel. So, neither one. So it's a trick question. I'm not very good at this, but as I've been trying to follow Jesus and to think like him and act like him and sometimes even respond like Jesus (which I'm up to like, maybe .01%), one of the things I've realized is that Jesus does funny things with trick questions. He either never answers them or he gives a better question back, or he tells a story that doesn't make any sense - we call those parables.

So, I've been training myself to do things like that, so what I first do though is I pray. And my prayer in this kind of situation goes like this: erp! So I did that, and in that prayer's a whole thing - it's a thing about "help," it's a thing about, "I'm a knucklehead. I can't believe I'm here once again. How does this always happen to me? And...mostly help." So I did that. It kind of comes out spontaneously. I gulp. Erp! And then I said what I've trained myself to do in those kind of tricky situations - to say, "That reminds me of a story Jesus told," which, it didn't.

But it's not technically a lie, because what you're doing is you're saying that slowly, and you're hoping by the time you get to the word "told" that you're reminded of a story Jesus told. The key to that is you have to know some stories that Jesus told. We call them parables. So, I'm not very bright, I'm not a good memorizer or whatever, but there's 45-ish (depending on how you count them) parables. Most of them are pretty short. I know all of them and so a few of them would come to mind easily.

So, I said that. I went "erp! That reminds me of a story Jesus told." The guy is holding the microphone like this for me [pointing at me] and at any time, he could have pulled it back, but he didn't. And he went like this when I said, "That reminds me of a story Jesus told," he went [furrowed brow, shrugging]. Like, how could the question, "Tell us why you love Hezbollah and hate Israel," remind you of a story Jesus told?

And when I said, "Jesus...told" - boom, right there: The parable of the good father (or the prodigal son) came to mind. Now, that's one of three or four - the Good Samaritan, there's a few that would pop into my mind most likely, so that's kind of a cheat. I love the parable of the good father in Luke 15, and so I just said, "That reminds me of a story Jesus told. There was this wealthy patriarch who lived just over there." We were in Tyre - the biblical cities of Sidon and Tyre are in modern day Lebanon. We're about 10 miles from the Israeli boarder. I said, "Jesus told this story just over there about this wealthy patriarch who had two sons, and the younger son, while the dad's still alive, comes to him and asks for his half of the inheritance."

When I said that, the camera man, who was going like this [behind the camera] did this [quickly moved out from behind the camera staring at me] like, "What? How could the younger son, while the dad's still alive - how could he do that? That's like wishing your father was dead!"

"And then the father gave it to him."

He did that again [head out from behind the camera]. He kept going back and forth like this quite a lot. Why would the father give...that's crazy.

“And then the younger son had lots of money, so he had lots of friends, and he went to a foreign land and spent all the money, and then lost all of his friends, and then ended up eating with pigs.”

And when I said “pigs,” the cameraman guy just went real slow [out from behind the camera] like this...and he never went back to the hole. I don’t even know where the camera was from there on, because he was... There’s pigs in this story (Muslims don’t do pigs like the Jews didn’t and don’t do pigs). There’s a younger son asking for his inheritance while the dad’s still alive. The younger son, dad’s still alive, pigs - at least three things are wrong so far. It’s a very strange story. And you can see the guy with the microphone - I don’t know why he didn’t pull it back - he’s just standing there and he has this shocked look on his face. What kind of a story is this?

And I’m just looking at the camera - just going for it - I mean they asked me that trick question. I feel like if they give me a trick question, I’m going to give them a trick answer. So, then I carry on with the story. The younger son comes to his senses, as he should, and then he starts to rehearse his speech as he goes back home.

“I’m not worthy to be called your son anymore. I mean, obviously not worthy to be called your son anymore. But, being your servant would be so much better than eating and sleeping and drinking with pigs.”

So the younger son is walking back - probably rehearsing this speech. And it appears that the father’s been watching for the son, because when the father sees the son, from a long way away, he runs to him.

When I said, “The father runs to the son,” the guy with the light almost fell over. The guy with the microphone actually went like this [pulling the mic back, pushing it forward, pulling it back, etc.] and then the guy with the camera, he’s just not moved and his nose is all wrinkled up and he’s just staring at me like, “What?”

Do you know that that’s the most shocking point of that whole story? Patriarchs don’t run. Middle Eastern men don’t run. You know, men in those days, and still these days in the Middle East have man dresses - I mean they’re dishdashas, thawbs - long dresses. I don’t know, because I’m not a woman, but if you’re a lady and you wear a long skirt, it’s kind of hard to run in a long skirt, I’d imagine. And I have worn long man skirts, kind of the robes that are very comfortable, by the way, but the only way you can run in them is to hike them up, and kind of pull them up to here, and that would be an unthinkable shame, and no man would ever do that. And no wealthy man of honor would ever run anywhere, and he would definitely not run with his skirt hiked up. It’s all wrong. There’s no chance.

But he does that. The father runs down the road. And I did this on the TV, I said, [hand held up] “And the father ran to the son,” and I’m doing this, and I’m sure when Jesus told this story two thousand years ago, all the hearers then and all the Hezbollah hearers now, were thinking, “Ah, that’s good. Justice. The father will kill the son. Obviously! Obviously, you kill the son. The son has shamed...do you understand? ...

You have to kill! The only way to restore honor to the shamed family is to kill the one who has shamed the family. We don’t get that. That’s horrific to us. I’m not saying it’s good, but it’s the culture then and now of the Middle East. So they thought for sure the father would run down and kill the son - thus restoring honor to the name of the family who was shamed, but he doesn’t do that. He...hugs the son, and he wraps a new robe around his shoulders and he puts a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet, and he brings the son back home and then everybody then and on TV that day, they’re saying, “Ah! That’s a very clever father. He brings his son back home to the village to kill him! Because you’ve gotta kill the son - the younger son. How is that possible? And then the father was so foolish to give him the money and he squandered it, and now he comes back. This is good. He’ll kill the son in front of the whole village. That is the right thing to do. That’s called justice.”

And, he brought the son back home, and he threw a party. And so I said, to the Hezbollah TV, “That’s why we’re here. Because the God we serve throws parties for sinners.” And I stopped. And the guy pulled the microphone back, and he said this, he went, “Ya Allah, Ya Allah, Ya Allah,” which is “Oh God, Oh God, Oh God.” He’s probably thinking, “I’m gonna lose my job!”

And he went like this [cut] and the light went off on the camera, and he just put the microphone down - I’m still sitting there - and he walked around the corner, and he said to the Hezbollah leader, who was talking to my governor friend, he said, “I told Mr. Carl to tell us why he loved the Hezbollah and hated Israel, but he didn’t do that.” And the Hezbollah leader said, “What did he say?”

He said, “He just told a story about Jesus.” And the Hezbollah leader said, “It’s Carl! What did you think he was going to say?”

And then the Hezbollah leader leaned behind the governor, and went like this to me [thumbs up]. That’s the power of a parable.

Let’s pray

Prayer

We’re going to move now into a time of personal response. And there several ways to respond:

1. Singing

We're going to sing some songs together that help us reflect on some of these things.

While that singing is taking place, you will also have the opportunity for prayer.

2. Prayer

If you need prayer for anything at all, we have people here who are eager to do that.

Also, while that is going on, you'll have a chance to take communion

3. Communion

Communion is a symbolic act, instituted by Jesus as a way for us to remember the way he willingly died for us. The unleavened bread serves as a symbol of Jesus' body broken on the cross. The wine or juice symbolize his blood that was spilled for us.

We have people ready to serve you communion. Juice is on your left, wine is on your right. Feel free to partake of either, as it fits with your tradition. Just break off a piece of the bread, dip it in the cup, and eat.

We offer communion each week for *anyone* who wants to take it. There's no membership requirement or hoops to jump through. You are guests at this symbolic table of Jesus, so please feel free to partake.

4. Giving

Lastly, during this time, you will have an opportunity to give financially to the work of this church. If you're a guest with us today, we don't expect you to give anything. However, for those who consider this your church home, and for those who believe in what we're trying to do here, this is our chance to give back to God a portion of what he has given us, and to support the work he has called this church to in Nakuru.

There is a tall box at the back with a slot in it. You can place your gifts in that box at any time as we are singing together.

So those are the four ways to respond: Singing, Prayer, Communion, and Giving. All will be happening simultaneously. There's no order you have to do them in. You don't have to do them all. You don't have to do any of them. This is your time to respond in whatever way you desire.

At the end of that time, I'll pray a prayer of blessing over you before you go.

Closing Prayer