

**Jesus has offered us an invitation. We are invited by him to identify with the characters in a dramatic parable told as a ballad.** It is a ballad that has ties to the Old Testament and Epistle lessons. It is a ballad of being delivered from the wilderness of sin and alienation to the Promised Land of reconciliation with God and one's family.

I owe a great debt to Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, who wrote the books, Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes, from which I share many insights in this sermon.

Let us now accept Jesus' invitation and become immersed in his ballad. Let us come to sit at the feet of Jesus to hear his teachings about the kingdom of God. Sitting close beside us are tax collectors and sinners of all kinds. These social misfits are considered by the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, and that society to be outside the kingdom of God and in the wilderness of sin. Let us hear Jesus invite "those kinds of people," as well as all of us into the Kingdom of God.

Also, notice the scribes and Pharisees, who consider themselves to be the "righteous gate keepers" to the Kingdom of God, standing off to the side grumbling to themselves. They are greatly disturbed that Jesus has invited "those kind of people" to come in from the wilderness of sin to be reconciled to God and become a part of God's Kingdom. Completely aware of all that was going on, Jesus responds by telling the following dramatic parable.

In the first scene of the parable, we are in a village in the Middle East, probably just outside of Jerusalem. According to Dr. Bailey, we can go to the Middle East, today, and find villages and people that look and think just as they did in the time of Jesus.

Here, we find a well-to-do father and his two sons. The younger son, who

is probably 18-20 years old and unmarried, comes to speak with his father about a very serious issue. The son plans to leave home and needs some money to do so. This has not changed over the centuries has it?

However in this case, the younger son says to his father, **I demand my share of my inheritance from you, NOW!**" Not only was this younger son being disrespectful, but what he was demanding was "illegal and illegitimate" in a village in the Middle East. Legally, property might pass from father to son in one of two ways, by a will after the father is dead, or as a gift that's giving is initiated by the father. If a father gives such a gift to a son or sons, they shall not sell the property while the father is alive and the father continues to receive all the interest coming from the productiveness of the property. In effect, the property remains in the family and essentially nothing is changed as long as the father lives. When this younger son demands "his inheritance", he wants not only to possess his share of the property, but he wants control of it and the interest. **He is telling his father to "drop dead, NOW."** **What occurs in this parable is sin, the sin of a broken relationship between the father and the son.**

Surprisingly, the father does not beat or disown his son, but he divides the property. One-third goes to the younger son who made the demand. Two-thirds goes to the obedient older son. You see, the older son always received the largest share. The younger son is given his share and the right to the interest as well. Then, he goes an unthinkable step further. He sells the property and all rights to the interest for cash. This is a devastating loss to the father. He will have less to live on in his old age. Property that had been in the family for centuries is now gone forever.

To add insult to injury, this younger son blows the money recklessly in

another land. He most likely blew it on throwing big parties and making foolish investments with Greek Gentiles in another land. In a Jewish family of Jesus' day, a son could be cut off from the family for marrying an immoral woman or for losing his property to Gentiles. To make matters even worse, this son gets a job feeding pigs, which the Gentiles ate and sometimes worshipped. Jews do not eat pork, nor raise pigs. The pig is hated throughout the Middle East. This son is so impoverished that he ends up eating the carob pods that were fed to the pigs. He is living in a hellish wilderness for his sins.

In the midst of this mess a miracle occurs. This young man suddenly comes to himself. We call it coming to one's senses or seeing one's self in a new light. This is the beginning of repentance. So, this repentant young man decides that he will humbly return to seek a job as a hired laborer, a craftsman, under his father. To be a craftsman was a respectable position, but to be **hired**, in the Middle Eastern culture, is an insult. It is as if you have sold yourself, but the young man had decided that he might as well sell himself to his father as to sell himself to someone else.

Furthermore, a hired servant is not guaranteed any wage or job security, but when you are lonely and starving, some hope of food is better than none. So, he journeys to repent of his sins before his father. His father might at least give him his daily bread for some labor. Rather than starve in the wilderness, maybe he could eat good food again as his ancestors did in the passage from Joshua.

It is important at this point that we understand that Jewish repentance involved three actions. 1. Compensation must be made for the sin, which meant a lifelong servitude for the young man. 2. Confession must be made

to the damaged party.

3. A person had to spend a period of time away from the community to prove sincerity. Forgiveness had to be earned. This young man believed that he would never again be considered part of the family and only after a long period of time might he be accepted back into the community. Despite the bleak possibilities, the young man returns to repent with the hope of reconciliation in order to heal the broken relationship with his father and the community. This is the purpose of repentance for any of us.

**Dr. Bailey suggests that we picture the young man contemplating all this as he walks the valley road back toward the village he once left in his dust. \*\*At the same time, let us see his father doing what he has done ever since that terrible day, watching the horizon for a sign of his son's return. The man is grieving deeply over the loss of his son, as well as his property. By law and tradition, the son was supposed to be dead to him, but he hopes, prays and watches for his lost younger son anyway. Then, on this particular day, he spots his son, off in the distance, coming up the road.**

Now, the village stands between the younger son and the father. By tradition and law this younger son is to be shunned and even beaten by the village for asking his father to drop dead and for losing the property. Before the father can make a move, the word of the younger son's return is spreading throughout the village.

Picture the village people lining up to sneer at, spit on and even take a swing at the younger son. **See the father suddenly run as fast as he could, robes flying, through this hostile crowd to throw his arms around his son. He threw aside all rules of dignity, for old men do not**

**run in that culture, to be reconciled to his younger son. Watch as the** father protects his son and absorbs the village's punishment meant for his son as they walk back to the house. On the way, the son offers repentance and pleads for forgiveness. The father hardly hears this because, the son who was lost, is now found. As Jesus said in Luke 15:7 "there is great rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who was lost but now is found."

The son offers a Christian-style repentance. He admits his unworthiness. He is then welcomed by grace alone by his father who took on any pain the son was to receive. No payment for the sins is made. No trial period is involved. Forgiveness and acceptance by the father is immediate. **II Corinthians 5 speaks to this, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view..in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...For our sake he made him to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."**

Not only is the son joyfully accepted back, but, he is also given the best robes, ring, shoes and banquet possible. The clothing and jewelry are signs that this lost son had been fully restored as a son. The robe means he is a guest of honor. The ring means he has authority and the shoes means he was now a free man. Only slaves went without shoes. **He and his father are reconciled, the past was over and gone. He is a new creation. He is set free from the wilderness of sin and alienation.**

The banquet resembles the messianic banquet of which Jesus often spoke. The precious fatted calf is killed to feed the 100-300 angry villagers who are expected to be there. Meat is a scarce commodity and must be eaten that day. But all this is done, for the "once lost but now found son."

## **The messianic banquet had begun.**

Off in the distance, the older son hears all the noise of the festival, and asks a young boy what is happening. Young boys were not invited to the feast, but could only watch from a distance. The young boy tells him that his brother is back and that the festival is for his lost brother. The older son is angry beyond belief. The relationship between the father and the older son is about to break with a loud snap. The older son then proceeds to insult his father in every way possible. The older son refuses to take part in the festivities, and even refuses to enter his father's house to at least greet people. It is his responsibility. Then he sends for his father like his father is the servant. **These are actions of disrespect for his father, and signs of a broken relationship.**

The father, again, humbles himself, even unto ridicule by coming out to this now arrogant older son, who had always been a part of him and who is now apart from him. The father should have cursed and punished the son, **but instead he pleads with him to join in the celebration of the return of his "once lost, but now found brother."**

This son is unmoved by his father's pleas and continues to insult his father. Not only is the older son wrong in this, but according to the rules of the time, it is the older son's responsibility to be a mediator who would work to reconcile the father to the younger son and heal the family. As I said, the insults continue... The older son continues to denounce and embarrass his father in front of the guests, "For many years I have served you like a slave," implying that his father has treated him as a low life laborer rather than a son. This is not true at all.

The haranguing continues, “I have never disobeyed your orders,” meaning that he has worked hard to earn his father’s respect and his inheritance, but now look at what he gets for it. He pours out the insults. He acts like he has to be on the defense against his father. Notice that he does not even call his father, “Father,” but “YOU did this to me! YOU mistreated me!” **He was purposely breaking his father’s heart.**

He is not done, but drones on by attacking the father throughout the feast. “What have you ever done for me? You never ever even killed a goat for me, and my friends,” implying that as the loyal older son, I never even received second best let alone the calf killed for me.” “You have killed a fatted calf for this son of yours, who blew all of your property on prostitutes.” He accuses his brother of being with prostitutes in order to degrade him more. He brazenly disowns his brother, which he had no right to do.

Again, the father of the two lost sons deeply humbles himself for the sake of this older son who deserves to be beaten to a pulp and cast out of the family and village. By sheer grace, the father re-invites this older son who has lost himself, while at home, back to the party, back into the family and back to his inheritance by saying, “My son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours.” The father absorbs the evil from this son, and re-focuses the older son on the purpose of the party and reconciliation to his brother by saying, “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.”

**As with most of Jesus’ parables, the ending is left open because it is up to us to finish it by catching his message, respond to him in some manner. By God’s grace have we caught the message? Can we see Jesus now facing toward us with his arms of grace outstretched to**

**receive us? Will we enter his embrace and be set from the wilderness of sin? Will we be reconciled to God and those with whom we have been alienated? And our answer is.....**

From Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes, by Kenneth E. Bailey, former Presbyterian Fraternal Worker and Chairperson of the Biblical Department at the Near Eastern School of Theology, Beirut, Lebanon, pages 161, 191

Luke 15:11-23, **The younger son**,  
*The first six stanzas*, Speech I,  
he leaves,  
in need but unrepentant,  
becomes a pig herder,  
eats nothing,  
is dying,

*The second six stanzas*, ,Speech II,  
he returns  
in need and truly repentant  
becomes an honored son  
feeds on fatted calf  
is alive

Luke 15:24-32, **The older son**,  
*The first three stanzas*, Speech 1,  
he comes

your brother is safe, lets feast  
a father comes to reconcile  
*The second four stanzas*, Speech II,  
complaint I-how you treat me  
complaint II-how you treat him  
a father tries to reconcile  
your brother is safe, let's feast

Please turn in your Bibles to the Old Testament Lesson from Joshua 5:9-12. The Hebrew people had been forced to wander in the Sinai wilderness for 40 years

because of their sins against God. Now God has finally delivered them to the Promised Land which included some really good food.

9 The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. 10 While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. 11 On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. 12 The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year. The Word of the Lord.

Please turn in your Bibles to the Epistle Lesson in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. The Apostle Paul wrote this passage to a congregation that was fighting amongst its self. He calls them to become reconciled to God and one another.

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God, though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

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The Gospel Lesson is from Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32. Through the years, Christians have entitled the parable from Luke 15: 11-32 as the "Prodigal Son." Recently, biblical scholars have told us that it would be more accurate to call this parable the ballad of "A Father and Two Lost Sons." Or we might say that this is a "ballad about bad lads".

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 So he told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. 12 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. 13 A 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. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 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. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with b(3612) the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 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! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" 20 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. 21 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.' 22 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. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for 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. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the

fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 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. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31 Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 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.’” The Word of the Lord.

The Epistle Lesson is from Second Corinthians 5: 16-21. In this portion of scripture, Paul explains how we are reconciled to God by what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We are also told that as people who have been reconciled to God, we are to be Christ’s ambassadors to the world.

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;

19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. The Word of the Lord.

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
March 14, 2010  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Set Free From the Wilderness  
Joshua 5:9-12 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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Let us now accept Jesus' invitation and become immersed in his ballad. Let us come to sit at the feet of Jesus to hear his teachings about the kingdom of God. Sitting close beside us are tax collectors and sinners of all kinds. These social misfits are considered by the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, and that society to be outside the kingdom of God and in the wilderness of sin. Let us hear Jesus invite "those kinds of people," as well as all of us into the Kingdom of God.

Also, notice the scribes and Pharisees, who consider themselves to be the "righteous gate keepers" to the Kingdom of God, standing off to the side grumbling to themselves. They are greatly disturbed that Jesus has invited "those kind of people" to come in from the wilderness of sin to be reconciled to God and become a part of God's Kingdom. Completely aware of all that was going on, Jesus responds by telling the following dramatic parable.

In the first scene of the parable, we are in a village in the Middle East, probably just outside of Jerusalem. According to Dr. Bailey, we can go to the Middle East, today, and find villages and people that look and think just as they did in the time of Jesus.

Here, we find a well-to-do father and his two sons. The younger son, who is probably 18-20 years old and unmarried, comes to speak with his father about a very serious issue. The son plans to leave home and needs some money to do so. This has not changed over the centuries has it?

However in this case, the younger son says to his father, **I demand my share of my inheritance from you, NOW!**" Not only was this younger son being disrespectful, but what he was demanding was "illegal and illegitimate" in a village in the Middle East. Legally, property might pass from father to son in one of two ways, by a will after the father is dead, or as a gift that's giving is initiated by the father. If a father gives such a gift to a son or sons, they shall not sell the property while the father is alive and the father continues to receive all the interest coming from the productiveness of the property. In effect, the property remains in the family and essentially nothing is changed as long as the father lives. When this younger son demands "his inheritance", he wants not only to possess his share of the property, but he wants control of it and the interest. **He is telling his father to "drop dead, NOW." What occurs in this parable is sin, the sin of a broken relationship between the father and the son.**

Surprisingly, the father does not beat or disown his son, but he divides the property. One-third goes to the younger son who made the demand. Two-thirds goes to the obedient older son. You see, the older son always received the largest share. The younger son is given his share and the right to the interest as well. Then, he goes an unthinkable step further. He sells the property and all rights to the interest for cash. This is a devastating loss to the father. He will have less to live on in his old age. Property that had been in the family for centuries is now gone forever.

To add insult to injury, this younger son blows the money recklessly in another land. He most likely blew it on throwing big parties and making foolish investments with Greek Gentiles in another land. In a Jewish family of Jesus' day, a son could be cut off from the family for marrying an immoral woman or for losing his property to Gentiles. To make matters even worse, this son gets a job feeding pigs, which the Gentiles ate and sometimes worshipped. Jews do not eat pork, nor raise pigs. The pig is hated throughout the Middle East. This son is so impoverished that he ends up eating the carob pods that were fed to the pigs. He is living in a hellish wilderness for his sins.

In the midst of this mess a miracle occurs. This young man suddenly comes to himself. We call it coming to one's senses or seeing one's self in a new light. This is the beginning of repentance. So, this repentant young man decides that he will humbly return to seek a job as a hired laborer, a craftsman, under his father. To be a craftsman was a respectable position, but to be **hired**, in the Middle Eastern culture, is an insult. It is as if you have sold yourself, but the young man had decided that he might as well sell himself to his father as to sell himself to someone else.

Furthermore, a hired servant is not guaranteed any wage or job security, but when you are lonely and starving, some hope of food is better than none. So, he journeys to repent of his sins before his father. His father might at least give him his daily bread for some labor. Rather than starve in the wilderness, maybe he could eat good food again as his ancestors did in the passage from Joshua.

It is important at this point that we understand that Jewish repentance involved three actions. 1. Compensation must be made for the sin, which meant a lifelong servitude for the young man. 2. Confession must be made to the damaged party. 3. A person had to spend a period of time away from the community to prove sincerity. Forgiveness had to be earned. This young man believed that he would never again be considered part of the family and only after a long period of time might he be accepted back into the community. Despite the bleak possibilities, the young man returns to repent with the hope of reconciliation in order to heal the broken relationship with his father and the community. This is the purpose of repentance for any of us.

Dr. Bailey suggests that we picture the young man contemplating all this as he walks the valley road back toward the village he once left in his dust. \*\*At the same time, let us see his father doing what he has done ever since that terrible day, watching the horizon for a sign of his son's return. The man is grieving deeply over the loss of his son, as well as his property. By law and tradition, the son was supposed to be dead to him, but he hopes, prays and watches for his lost younger son anyway. Then, on this particular day, he spots his son, off in the distance, coming up the road.

Now, the village stands between the younger son and the father. By tradition and law this younger son is to be shunned and even beaten by the village for asking his father to drop dead and for losing the property. Before the father can make a move, the word of the younger son's return is spreading throughout the village.

Picture the village people lining up to sneer at, spit on and even take a swing at the younger son. **See the father suddenly run as fast as he could, robes flying, through this hostile crowd to throw his arms around his son. He threw aside all rules of dignity, for old men do not run in that culture, to be reconciled to his younger son. Watch as the** father protects his son and absorbs the village's punishment meant for his son as they walk back to the house. On the way, the son offers repentance and pleads for forgiveness. The father hardly hears this because, the son who was lost, is now found. As Jesus said in Luke 15:7 "there is great rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who was lost but now is found."

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**The messianic banquet had begun.**

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# RECONCILIATION

