

Check out the service at [www.fpcd.org](http://www.fpcd.org).

How do you realize true love?

- ~ You see it in pictures.
- ~ You hear the words.

When does love become a reality? And when it becomes a reality, how does it change you?

The younger son, who had thrown everything in his father's face, wasted a third of his father's wealth, who had disgraced the family and the believing community, came to the father bargaining: "I'll be a hired worker, a servant, if you will just get me out of this."

The older son, who had stayed, who had done the right thing, who was immensely angry, told the father, resentful because his apostate brother was being treated as a dignitary: "I've slaved for you all these years."

They were not really expecting love. The younger son said, "I will do a servant's work, and serve you as master." The older son defined himself as "I have been slaving for a master."

The father would not accept either.

For the younger son he said, "Bring a robe—*the best!*—and a ring, and new shoes, and slaughter that calf." Let's celebrate!

To the older he said, "My son, you are with me always. All I have is yours!" He was saying *I am not taking from you to give to him*.

This man really gave himself to his two sons.

This is quite different, probably, from what you and I know of love. Today we want to understand God's love.

To do that, we are going to step out of the story to the hearers—the audience. That's you, and me. Remember, this is a parable told to an audience of Pharisees and scribes. They were making an effort to be good, churchgoing believers in God, but not too sure where love for the Father fit in.

We know this because when tax collectors and sinners came to listen to Jesus, and Jesus wasn't bothered by it, he even ate with them, they were disgruntled and angry.

Jesus, who is God incarnate, God in the flesh, tells them why he welcomes sinners. His parables tell us his story.

He's like the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, throws it over his shoulder and sings it a happy love song on the way back. To that audience shepherds were lowly and sheep were dirty, disgusting, and dumb; but Jesus tells them the Shepherd is thrilled to have the sheep back.

It's a triumph of love. The shepherd cared enough to go find it. He calls all his friends to come party with him over his triumph.

Now let's have a pop quiz. What is the most popular passage in the Old Testament? (hint: it's a Psalm)

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. (23:1)*

The Lord is THRILLED to have the sheep back.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; *he restores my soul. (23:2-3)*

The Lord RESTORES THE LOST, that is, "when you and I wander away into dark places."

The Father in the story shows us.

He's obviously watching for his son:

"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" (Lk 15:20).

Middle Eastern men do not run. His action is costly. He's humiliated himself in front of all the neighbors by running down the road to greet this errant son and showering him with kisses. This is something only a mother would do—then and now!

He's expected to sit sternly in the house, hold himself aloof, and not care if this son is dead or alive. But he acts with complete compassion, lavishly restoring him.

This is the love of God. And he is so thrilled to find you that he has a party over you. Can you imagine that—that when you came to know the Lord, he threw a party over you and the angels rejoiced? Did you know when you get to heaven, that banquet is a great party of triumph for Jesus and God bringing you there?

But isn't it we who feel like we are the ones who have to give?

We bring our tithe  
We do the work of the church  
We fix the building  
We are supposed to go out and get sinners

Do you think you are the one who gives to God, or God is the one who lavishes love on you?

This story of the Prodigal Son might be titled: **The Welcome by the Loving Father** because his love for both sons was so great it was unthinkable.

This past week a good friend died suddenly. She lives in the next neighborhood over; our kids went to school together; we volunteered as lay leaders at Hackberry Creek Church since the

1990s. She had been out with her best friend shopping, came home about 4:00, sat down at her desk, and didn't show up at 5:00 to pick up her grandchild from daycare. Her daughter found her, on the floor, feet still under her desk. She had died instantly. She was 58.

So I have been thinking about her and about her life. I wouldn't have thought this five days ago but now I see it. She gave a lot. But God gave a lot to her.

She was one of those kids who was raised in the church, and it didn't mean that much to her as a young adult because she had not made the Lord her own.

But when she helped start that little church, she began exploring God.

She found people who loved her. She nagged her sister to come, and finally she did because of Michele's persistence. They did quirky, silly skits for the women's ministry. Her sister had a rough time because she had a baby who died shortly after birth. Michele helped her find solace in her faith, "God loves you and will help you through." She essentially ran down the road to meet her sister, hold out her hand, and draw her in when she was in a very dark sadness.

Later, other experiences, like the breakup of her husband's business partnership were hard, but Michele never worried. She figured God would take care of it.

She was like the good son in many ways; constantly doing things for God and her church. But then one of her own children became a prodigal. She prayed and waited. When that child returned, she threw a big party—a wedding, and celebrated over her child.

Many people would have cut their losses and gone home. She felt the Father's love and acted it out to those in her own life and neighborhood.

The father gave costly love to the prodigal and to the good son. Michele gave costly love too. She knew the love of the Father for her, and she walked in his footsteps.

Wouldn't it be great if both sons responded to the father's love? What if the older son embraced his father, then went into the house and welcomed his brother home, and the father celebrated with both his sons? What if both sons walked in the footsteps of the father?

What if we all walked in the footsteps of Jesus and the Father?

We are not told how the story ends. So it is up to us to write it.

Have you identified with one of the brothers? Are you one who has wandered away but returned and thrown yourself at the mercy of the father telling him you will be his servant?

He's inviting you to more—he's inviting you to enter into his love.

Are you the one who has always done the right things, but you feel like it is a duty?

He's inviting you to more—he's inviting you to enter into his love.

But it is strictly an invitation; he will never force you because he wants you to be free to love him in return.

God's love cost him a great deal. My prayer is that in recognizing his sacrifice for you, you exhibit costly love, too, for then love has become your reality.

AMEN