

“RESTORING BALANCE TO THE FORCES”

**A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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(transcribed from audio file)

The Word of the Lord comes from Luke 15:11-32. Let us hear what God is saying to us today.

And he said, A certain man had two sons:

And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

*Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.
And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.
And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.
And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.
And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:
But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.
And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.
It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.* NRSV

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Oh I wanted it to be Star Wars Sunday today, so bad. I'm a big Star Wars fan. Those of you who don't understand why is today Star Wars Day, because the date is May 4th. May the 4th be with you. And also with you. Come on Christians. You can get this line. You know, I mean, I've got my Star Wars belt buckle on today. I got my Star Wars socks on today. I snuck in little Star Wars pictures into the opening announcements. Pastor Alex is like, "Oh I added a few more slides" and I'm like, "Okay" and then I snuck in and added a few more.

I realize though that Star Wars isn't as popular as it used to be. It used to be a big deal, but like movies in general were bigger deals in the past. It wasn't so easy to get a movie. You couldn't stream it. You couldn't rent it. You just saw it in the movie theatre. If you missed it there – I don't know, maybe in a couple of years they'd stick it on TV for you. And then after that, and yes, I did grow up way back when and we didn't have VCR's Pastor Alex. I know. We just got done makin' the wheel and then . . . we had to wait for the VCR.

But movies would run a long time. They're making so many movies now. Back in the 80's they made an average of about 6,000 movies a year. And now we put out almost 18,000 movies a year, so you just got more of it going out there and it's in all these different places so we're not all watching the same thing. Movies would go into movie theatres, and they would be there for weeks upon weeks.

The movies that had the three largest runs in movie theatres, that actually ran the longest. Number 3, Rocky Horror Picture Show. The Rocky Horror Picture Show was . . . Its first release went out and it spent 118 weeks going around in theatres. Number 2 – Star Wars, the first movies. Star Wars the New Hope. 135 weeks. For over 2 years you could go to a movie theatre and see that movie cause there was nowhere else to see it. Once it left that theatre it was gone.

And the number 1 – The Sound of Music. 147. For over 2 years that's where you would go, so eventually everybody went and saw Star Wars. I mean, maybe not everybody, but a lot of people did cause, well it's been out a year and a half and people keep yapping about this. I guess I'll go see it. So, maybe people went to see it and then go, "I didn't like it." And that's fine, but everybody would be talking about it. It was in the culture, but movies can't have that kind of impact today. Not all the same stories are popular.

What I loved about Star Wars when I was a kid was that it was like it was the first time you had science fiction in a movie that seemed to have some substance to it. It was complex. There were all these relationships. It wasn't just like here's the good guy and here's the bad guy and then they go at it and that's the end of the story. And the special effects were amazing.

One of the things that I learned from that movie is that bad guys are complex. It's not always a clear-cut story. And there's even an opportunity for restoration, even for the bad guys.

Sorry. Spoiler Alert. For those of you were now going to go back and watch the three original trilogy movies. Darth Vader ended up coming back from the dark side in the end. I know. I see one person disappointed already. Honestly, it's been over 40 years. You missed it.

It's important to have those stories, though because when we have common stories it gives us a common culture in things to talk about. So, while we may not have that in modern mass media of movies anymore, we as Christians have that in the stories that come to us from the Bible. These stories that we hold onto together.

This story that we have today is one of those stories that is good for us to hold on to. On the surface it's a story of somebody who took some of the family money, wasted it, came back and said he was sorry and was forgiven and they threw a party. Yea! That's the story. But it is also a much more complex story than that. There are so many layers as to what is happening here in this story.

Yes, you have the son who goes to his father and says, “Give me my half of the inheritance.” He might as well just told his dad, I wish you were dead. I want us to fast forward to that moment where, you’re dead and I get your money. That’s the way it would have been perceived in that culture.

The father gives it to him and then he goes off and he squanders it in dissolute living. I love that phrase – dissolute living. Right? That means he went and did the bad stuff. Okay? Lived all the little naughty life. Right? Goin’ out. Wastin’ it. All the money gone. He finally has to put himself into servitude to someone else. Things are so bad that he’s hangin’ out with the pigs. And when you’re a good little Jewish boy, hangin’ out with the pigs, being willing to eat what the pigs eat, that’s a low. At this point he’s at a low. His family is in utter shame. You know everyone in the village is over at the well. “Did you hear what happened with the Johnson boy? Yeah. Took all the money. Ran off. Dissolute living.”

He has made his family an embarrassment. He has made his father an embarrassment. But he has this idea. Look, things are so bad for me and my dad’s servants live better than I do. I’m gonna go back and admit what I’ve done. I’m gonna admit the wrong that I’ve done. I’m gonna say I’m sorry and then I’m gonna say, just make me one of your slaves. That’s all I ask. Just make me one of your slaves.

And so, he goes back home. Now the father sees him coming from a distance and he runs to him. I’m gonna tell you right now. In this culture, grown men don’t run like that. That’s just not proper. And you certainly don’t go running after that son who created such a horrible reputation for your family, that son who has embarrassed you, who has brought shame into your family, that everyone is talking about. And you run out to him like some kind of child? What are you doing?

And so he runs out there and he embraces him. His son has not even apologized yet. He could be coming back for more money. “Hey dad. I need another loan.” At this point the father doesn’t even know why he is coming. But before he even is sorry, he is embraced and loved and then the son starts the speech he had rehearsed. “Oh father. I did a terrible thing. Sinned against you” and he was about ready to get to the point where he says, make me a slave of yours. But before he can get to that the father goes, “Hold that! Quick! Get the Gucci robe! Get the Gucci robe out. Let’s go!” Right? “Put the ring on him. Give him sandals. My son has status again in my household. My son is fully restored in my household. My son is forgiven.”

He doesn't have to lower himself to becoming a servant or a slave in his household. He will not be that. He will be fully restored. Fully forgiven. Does this make the father look like a fool to some people? Absolutely. But the father doesn't care because the father loves him this much. And they throw a big ole party.

Now a lot of times when we read this story we end right there. Right? See forgiveness comes blah, blah blah but that's like stopping after episode 4. You gotta get the rest of the Star Wars Trilogy to know what really happens to the characters.

So, we move on to the next stage where the older son, who by the way should have stopped his younger brother from that nonsense way back when, when he was wishing dad dead and wanting to take his inheritance, but he didn't step up then, but oh now he's all mad. "Uh, well, I did all these good things for you, and I was loyal and I was a good kid. I was the good kid and now you welcome this delinquent back. You remember he did the dissolute living thing, dad. Are you kidding me? And I've been faithful to you."

Some of you right now are like, oh I'm that one. I got one of them siblings and mom and/or dad are always forgiving them. Yeah. The goody, good who did all the right things is watching and there's a party going on? Are you kidding me? And he confronts his father. He says to his father, "That son of yours". It's kind of like, do any of you have multiple kids? Even with my own kids I do this. You look at your spouse and you're like, "That son of yours".

He's completely lacking in any acknowledgement that he has a relationship to his brother. He's not saying, my brother. He's saying, this son of yours. He's making it a badge of shame for his father to wear. "That son of yours. Look what he did and after all I did."

And what does the father respond? The father said, "But we had to. We had to celebrate, because this brother of yours was lost and now is found."

The father reminds the other son of the relationship that he has with his brother. Now we had to wait, back in the late 70's and early 80's, a long time before we got the next sequel in the Star Wars series and we've been waiting 2,000 years and we don't have the sequel to this one. What happens? Does the elder son kinda go "Okay dad" and then go into the party? Does he just stay out in the field and grumble? If I had to guess, I'm guessing he didn't go in and that's unfortunate.

We call this parable sometimes the parable of the lost son and the thing is, is that we start off the story with one son being lost and I think we end with the other son being lost.

This story invites us into the wonderful way that our God thinks of us. This story tells us very clearly that no matter what you do, you will be welcomed back; that there is no dissolute living that you can get yourself into that makes God say, "I'm done with you." God has forgiveness and love for you.

In this story the father represents God and God runs out, regardless of what that looks like to anyone else and loves us, even before we're sorry and once we're sorry, simply restores us, fully.

You know this is the beginning of Mental Health Awareness month and the really terrible thing about our history with mental health is that because mental health sometimes seems so closely related to will power and our ability to make good decisions that sometimes we have in the past turned someone's mental health into something we end up blaming them for. We've been horrible about the way we treat people. We've often assigned, oh they're just weird. They're just trouble. They just can't control themselves. We've been so awful. There was a time, not that far in our history, where we just shamed people who struggled with mental health issues to the point where they just didn't come out of their houses because of the way we treated them. We shamed them into corners, into dark corners of their homes. In some cases, we shamed them into locked rooms and in some cases, we shamed them into locked facilities. And we didn't understand it as an affliction. We just somehow said, "Wrong" and pushed it away.

The thing is that even when we were ignorant and didn't understand things, this parable tells us it doesn't matter what the reason is. Even if you're right in your messed up view of people's behavior, they always deserve our full love and efforts to bring healing and restoration and understanding and community back for people. It doesn't matter, even if it is that craziness that you think, you still aren't justified in doing that.

We especially, with people who have had mental health struggles with addiction, we want to blame it on them. Look, I like going back to my college reunions about every five years and you get together and you're talking, telling stories and some people, in a most embarrassing way, try to suddenly become their college self when they show up at a reunion and it doesn't fit. Right? But people will be talking and

I've heard things like this before. People would say like, "Oh you know, so and so, they're struggling with alcoholism now and not doing so well."

And then some other person, who let's say is not full of grace and loveliness, says something like, "Well, you know how they drank back in college. It's no wonder." And I'm sitting there thinking I remember how you drank in college.

People don't become alcoholics because they drank too much. It's a complex interaction of genetics and the way our neurochemistry is, and it can happen from just a few drinks or from a lot of heavy drinking. But we took people with addiction, and we made it their fault, and we shamed them and we told them to stay in corners and not come out until they were better.

But this story that teaches us about the way we care for one another and love one another and forgive one another tells us that like even if your crazy idea that it's fully their fault, they did something bad, you still don't get to be that way with them. So how much more so now that we have the knowledge of the way these things work, should we be filled with compassion and mercy and constantly looking for ways to provide for people's mental health and for their battles with addiction. How much more so should we, now that we have the knowledge, cause if we have the knowledge then we can act appropriately for this situation.

Having the knowledge of who we are to be as Christians should have been enough, but having the other knowledge we have now should be enough to get us to act appropriately.

In the Empire Strikes Back there's this big reveal at the end. And for those of you who haven't seen the movie, spoiler alert again. You waited too long. Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father! We didn't see that coming in the movie theatre though and no one else did either. Because when they filmed that scene, what the actor behind the Darth Vader mask said was . . . He didn't say, "I'm your father", he said "Obi-Wan Kenobi killed your father." That's what he said on the set. There was only one person on the set, besides George Lucas, only one actor knew what the eventual line would be. That it would be, I am your father.

They told Mark Hamel, who played the Luke Skywalker character, they told him this is what the actual line was going to be, so you need to react according to that. So, when the line was said, Obi-Wan Kenobi killed your father, he goes, "Nooooooo!" I'm sure there were people on the set who thought that was a little over-acting, I mean it's not that big of a deal, you know. It's bad the old man killed your dad, but

I don't think it's that big of a deal. But in the final editing they snuck in the dialogue that said, "I am your father". And so, at the premier, the rest of the cast found out that plot twist the same time we did. They told Mark Hamel the truth so that he would act appropriately.

I'm telling you the truth of God's love and forgiveness and grace so that you can act appropriately. So that when it all comes together, what you do in the face of forgiving and restoring people who maybe even participated in their brokenness; for when you participate in the moment of truly loving and accepting and seeking in the healing and restoration of someone who is suffering from all sorts of afflictions, so that you can act appropriately.

May God be blessed by the way that you show this kind of love.

Halleluiah and Amen.