

One of the most wonderful words in the Bible is the word, “Until”. It is a word that appears either directly or implicitly in all three of the parables of Jesus that Luke records in Chapter 15. Jesus told these “lost and found” parables in response to those who were complaining about Jesus – can you imagine that people, religious people, were complaining about Jesus? Their complaint? “Jesus eats with sinners!”

The three “Lost and Found” Parables concern a lost sheep, a lost coin, and finally, a lost boy. In each of these stories from Jesus there is an “Until!” The shepherd searches “until” he finds the lost sheep, the woman searches “until” she finds the lost coin, and the father waits “until” the lost boy returns.

Our focus today is on the father waiting on the prodigal until his return. With an angry slam of the door, the father's wait begins. The son asks for and receives his share of his father's estate. The son as much as said to his very own father – your stuff is worth more than you, my inheritance means more to me than our relationship! The son goes off to a distant country, determined to put as much space as possible between him and his father. In this far off place the boy lived as he wanted, quickly descending to living like a pig, feeding off the slop thrown to the swine.

In my life and your life, we experience the truth that is this story of the prodigal child. We have slammed the door, We have wandered off; We have known the terrain of the distant country, the loneliness of living like orphans from God. Indeed we have – from time to time - been very creative in attempting to avoid the far reach of the hand of God. You can fill in the gaps for yourself.... Yet, we have also known the tender, resourceful, seeking, persistent, relentless reach of God toward us in love. We have discovered God waiting until we were ready to come home. God was always searching, seeking, finding, waiting, until we were found, until we were orphans no more! Through all the days and the nights of his son's absence, the father waited. Jesus' father waited until that day when the son's steps finally turned toward home. And when the son finally came home, the father was waiting to embrace him, even running out to meet him, so that the son might be home, home with the father.

Just as the President would never run and leap across the White House Lawn to hug some foreign dignitary, neither did nor do men in the Middle East run to greet an estranged relative. They sit stoically in their house waiting for the penitent to enter and offer their apology. Running to greet the wayward child is the mother's role. Jesus' father show us God as both Lord and servant, willing to do all it takes and more than all to restore the lost son.

The father in Jesus' story waits for the day when the son will return home. Standing, stubbornly, sentry-like, single-mindedly, straining, staring down the very same road along which the son departed. The father knows what must be done, how he must intervene. He knows the community custom, a ceremony marking off the boy because he squandered his inheritance. In the ceremony the villagers would bring a large jar, filled with burned nuts and corn, which they would break in front of the guilty child as a sign that this child is now cut off from his people. A “shunning”, a ceremony of exclusion, stating that never again will any of us have anything to do with you because you are a waster!

The father knows that if he and his son are to be reconciled, he has to act quickly- at the very moment his son returns. By his own actions, his own risky, costly actions, the father will signal how the community ought to act to welcome home the wanderer. He would act and intervene to prevent this

shunning ceremony from being enacted – the only alternative to the shunning was the father’s warm and open embrace for the returning child.

My friends, do you see it, do you know it, do you feel it? This return and welcome is the very heart of our faith, the hope we hold to, the faith we proclaim. No matter how we have lived, what we have believed, the mistakes we’ve made, the triumphs we have had, our hope, our only hope rests in the persistent, resourceful, patient, ever-seeking love of our God in Jesus Christ.

We really do believe that eventual, final, complete union with God is possible? Yes, we do!

We really do believe that there is a welcome for us, no matter where we have been? Yes, we do!

We really do believe there is an embrace for all of us no matter how long we have been gone? Yes, we do!

We really do believe this? Yes, we do!

We believe this, we experience this in God’s waiting for us and welcome to us. It makes a world of difference, that Jesus did not say that the father waited for a reasonable or even a long period of time to pass before giving up, but that Jesus’ father waits until . . . for some, for all Jesus’ father is waiting still...

We – especially those of us who are parents – we don’t need elaborate details about the son’s stay in a distant land. Parents are usually better off if they do not know the explicit details of their children’s escapades, even afterward. We do not need to know the grim particulars. We do not need to know the reckless decisions, the irresponsible actions. The father waits Until and tries not to let the pain become overwhelming.

Did you, do you ever wonder what God was feeling while you were playing games in a distant land? The father waits until...

Did you, do you ever wonder, what God was thinking while you were squandering your inheritance? The father waits until...

Have you ever attempted to quantify the depth of the hurt and pain that God feels for us wayward children? The father waits until...

Then the story gets more amazing, because even faced with such a welcome from his father, the son is still not truly sorrowful for what he has done. Oh yes, he is sorry, but only over the results of his actions, his being alone and hungry. If he had been truly sorrowful he would surely have returned with some sort of gift, but he walks back empty-handed. Even his supposed confession is a coolly, if not coldly calculated statement, certainly not a response filled with heartfelt penitence. The young man does not have a completely, concretely, contrite heart, all he offers are words, weak, wishy-washy, weaselly words, presented as a bargaining chip.

Maybe we could understand him taking an approach if he had been allowed to walk in ignominy all the way through the village back to his childhood home, with his father’s neighbors, and likely even his own cousins staring at him and pointing their fingers at him, until he entered his home and threw himself before his stern father.

But it is worse, way worse! Even after being embraced, even after seeing his father run towards him with tears in his eyes, the boy still thinks he can pull a fast one and con his father. Overlooking the

depth of his father's welcome he soft pedals his ill-founded, cheap promise that he will work to repay the money – as if that was what his father ever thought about. The son continues his charade, even in the moment of a loving embrace and poignant welcome and tender reconciliation, the son ignores the father's broken heart and the agony of rejected love that his father has endured.

We know this person don't we? Yes, we do! We know in [POINTING] our hearts who this fella is don't we? Yes, we do! We recognize this "Catch me if you can" person? We know this person very well – we know ourselves! Yes, we do!

Then the story gets even yet more amazing, then Jesus takes the story one more step into the Twilight Zone, into the Cranky Zone - the father throw a party for the son! We scream, "No! Stop! Don't reward the boy! Are you crazy?" What will prevent him from making the same mistake again? What will prevent the other son, from following this bad example? What will stop the other boys of the village from making the same demands of their fathers? What would Dr. Laura or Dr. Phil or Ann Landers or Emily Post say about this party?

All these questions evaporate when we understand that the party is the father's celebration. The child who was lost has been found. The festivities are for the father, not the son. The father is celebrating his family being brought together. He is not rewarding his son. Listen to his words, "let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

As the Church of the Waiting, Loving Father, we are to be the Church of the Until – like the village out of which came both the loving father and the wandering son we need convincing and converting in order that we can love and serve and seek and welcome any and all UNTIL everyone is welcomed, gathered in, loved, aware that they are loved and welcomed and have a place in God's plan to extend a welcome to everyone, everywhere.

Today I wish to invite all of you to let the truth of this story re-shape your life and empower each of you to commit yourself fully to your Lord, to examine your priorities and be fully engaged in the present and future of this congregation. As the Church of the Until we must stop looking around for someone else to step forward, but be ready to connect ourselves, our skills, gifts and abilities to the welcoming work that God has for us to do.

Our call to be the Church of UNTIL means being a church community in which Pastors and people connect together in ministry, in which everyone, older and younger serve together in every way possible, a community in which leaders and members engage together in service to the entire congregation and to the whole world. Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church in living through and into this new self-understanding is recalling and remembering and experiencing all over again the story of the Prodigal and the Welcoming father, theology that I call James Bond theology – namely what it means to be shaken and stirred as a church family. We know how deeply God has blessed us and we rejoice that God has waited patiently UNTIL we realized that what we need to do and all we can do is to offer a truly faithful, fully joyful response by devoting ourselves to expressing the life and love of Jesus Christ in all we are in all we do.

As 2010 unfolds before us, as we walk through Lent “in the footsteps of Jesus”, even today we are moving into new places and new beginnings. As such there is a serious need for all of us to embrace the story of the prodigal son and the prodigal father who risked all to welcome us home.

God waits until, we place our whole trust in God, until we get serious and active in following in the footsteps of our Lord.

God waits until, we face outward as a church, until we embrace the wanderer.

God waits until, the circles of our mission as a church are ever-widening, until we have room for all.

God waits until, each of you discover and experience the unending love that God has for you, until your life is aligned with God’s plan.

Even in the last few weeks, as a church family, we have wept together and prayed together and partied together because God waits until..

We have sought to embrace the needs and pains of people we have encountered in the name of the God who waits until..

Because God waits until we aim to tend the wounds of the hurt and the abused.

Because God waits until, we are here ready to be fully committed to God’s work.

Because God waits until, we all have a place and a purpose in the life of our church, the community of welcome and worship, service and sharing, prayer and praise, care and connection.

Because God waits until, we need to be and must be focused on expressing the love and welcome of God.

Because God waits until, you are asked and expected to be involved with and committed to some specific aspect of the life and action of our church family.

Every Sunday, and in a very special way in just a few weeks, we gather here and witness to the incredible lengths that God will go to have God’s way with us. All the way to the cross God will go. With arms outstretched in welcome toward us, God hangs there until. Committed to loving us actively and utterly, God is calling, asking, inviting, commanding us to devote our lives to God’s purposes of welcome and service and love and care. Until, until God’s Kingdom comes we have work to do, right here, right now. Amen.