

Hearing God's Heartbeat He Helps Us Return

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch
Copyright © 2010, Bill Couch. All rights reserved worldwide.
This material may be printed or copied for personal use only.

Today we continue with our series of messages entitled "Hearing God's Heartbeat" based upon The Prodigal God by Tim Keller. God's heart pulses with unconditional love for each of his children. He seeks out the lost—those who are separated from him. He wants them to experience his love and forgiveness. Because we have experienced God's love, we want others to experience it. We join with God in his mission to seek out the lost. We are praying for 4 persons for 40 days that we believe need to experience his love. Pray for God to open doors to share your faith, invite them to church or to attend our first Alpha class. There is no greater joy than knowing that you have helped to make an eternal difference in someone's life.

This morning we look again at the parable of the lost sons in Luke 15. We will see in this story how God restores us to his family. The younger son requested his share of the inheritance and squandered it on wild living. When he came to his senses he decided to return home and ask his father to take him back not as a son but as a hired hand.

Luke 15:20-24

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.

The father says, "This son of mine was dead and is alive again." Now obviously he was not physically dead, but there is a sense in which he was "dead" to the family. Upon deciding to return home, the son rehearsed this line, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." In Biblical times to be called a son was significant. Sonship was a status. Being a son carried certain privileges and responsibilities. One responsibility was to carry on the family name. The name of a family gave them their identity. The family name represented their values, beliefs and reputation. Another responsibility of a son was to participate in the family business. The oldest son received a double portion of the inheritance. The other sons received only one portion. The daughters received nothing. To us that does not seem

fair. But in the cultural context of the day it makes sense. Survival was dependent upon a strong, cohesive family. It took generations working together for the family to survive in a hostile world. Land and animals were the measurement of wealth. The security of the family depended upon the land and what it could produce. It took the entire family working together to survive.

Sonship was a big deal in Biblical times. This helps us understand the significance of Paul's words in Galatians:

Galatians 3:26, 28

You are all **sons of God** through faith in Christ Jesus, There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 4:7

So you are no longer a slave, but **a son**; and since you are **a son**, God has made you also an **heir**.

Because God is our Father we all have unique status as sons of God. Now some women take offense at being called a "son." They consider that language politically incorrect. Perhaps men should get upset when the Bible calls us brides of Christ! Some Bibles today have changed wording to be gender neutral. Rather than "you are all sons of God," these translations say "you are all children of God." Such a change in the translation causes us to lose something very profound. Paul says something radically subversive and revolutionary. Paul says that in God's family everyone is a son, we are all heirs. Male and female. Slave and free. Slaves had no status and received no inheritance. Females received no inheritance. Yet Paul says females and slaves are "sons." He elevates the status of women and slaves far beyond the cultural traditions of the day making them fully equal by calling them "sons." Any woman or slave who heard Paul's words would have been elated at the title of sonship. Every metaphor in the Bible captures something of the grace of God. Instead of resisting the metaphors, we need to embrace them and explore them and see what they really mean.

What does it mean that we are all sons of God? First of all it means we have lasting security. As soon as adoption papers are signed and filed, the status of a child changes instantly. Prior to adoption a child has no legal status in the family. Immediately after adoption, a child has full status just as a blood child of the family. In the eyes of the law, they are fully equal. When the younger brother severed his ties with his family and went to a far country, he lost his status as a son. Upon his return he said to his father, "I am no longer worthy to be called a son." In other words: "I have no legal status or claim upon this family. I took my part of the family inheritance and lost it. Treat me as one of the hired men." His status as a son is dead. But when the father greets him, he brings a robe and places the family's signet ring on his finger. He adopts him back into the family with full legal status. The signet ring meant that he could use it to seal contracts on behalf of the family. The father restored him to full status as a son.

When we separate ourselves from God, we take all the blessings he has given us and go our own way. We do with our lives what we want to do. The Bible says, "We became dead in our trespasses and sins." (Ephesians 2:1) We lost our place as sons of God. But when we repent of our sins and turn back to God, he welcomes us home and adopts us as sons. He gives us full status as heirs of the family. God adopts us as his own. We have a secure status. If we are a son of God, we have a secure status forever.

A son has intimate access with the father. A child has access to the most important persons on earth, presidents, kings and queens, prime ministers. Malia and Sasha have access to President Obama that no one else has! Because we are sons of God, we have direct access anytime to the throne room of heaven through prayer. The King of kings is our daddy. We can talk with him whenever we want. The privilege of a son is intimate access with the father.

A son also has a future hope. Paul says that because we are sons, we are heirs with Christ. God is restoring his kingdom on earth. One day he will establish a new heaven and a new earth. As sons we are expected to join the family business. We will rule with him on this new earth. We join with him now in his work of restoring and redeeming the world. When we participate in an impossible dream, we are joining in the family business. When you feed the hungry, provide clean water, visit the sick and those in prison you are joining with the father in his work of redeeming the world. When we invite persons to experience God's love and forgiveness, we are joining with God in his work of redeeming the world. Because we are involved in the family business, now we have a future hope of inheriting the Kingdom of God. We have a guaranteed inheritance that the world cannot give and it cannot take away. Paul says:

Romans 8:18-19

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.

The fullness of God's glory will be revealed in us. That means that we will become fully what God created us to be. We have a future hope as sons of God.

As sons of God we are a part of the family of God. To survive in a hostile world we need each other. In the family of God we experience brotherly love. That sounds vague and trite to us, but in the Bible it has radical implications. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, not just members of a religious community called LakeRidge United Methodist Church. The church of the first century took this very seriously. They held their possessions in common just as a biological family would. They took care of each other. If any had need, they responded to them as brothers and sisters. To be brothers and sisters means we are committed to each other whether we like it or not. You did not choose your parents or your siblings. You were born into your family for better or worse! Perhaps you have seen the

little saying: "I smile because you are my mother. I laugh because there is nothing you can do about it." That is how we feel about our families sometimes. We didn't choose them, but we are stuck with them. When we become a part of the family of God, we inherit all the children of God as brothers and sisters. All different races, political persuasions, those who support Mike Leach and those who don't! We are all part of the family. We learn to take care of each other even though we are different. When any has need, we respond as brothers and sisters in Christ.

In order for the younger brother to be adopted into the family, it was going to cost the older brother. Remember the father divided his estate between the two of them. The older brother got 2/3's and the younger brother 1/3. The younger brother wasted his. It was all gone. All that was left of the family inheritance now belonged to the older brother who stayed home and took care of business. But he was not willing to share. He did not want to give any part of his inheritance to the younger brother. Who can blame him?

But there is an elder brother who is willing to do that. Jesus is our elder brother. As the Son of God he gave up his place in heaven so we could have it. He gave up his inheritance so we could have it. "He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man." (Philippians 2:6, 7) He gave his life for us that we might be adopted as sons.

Earnest Gordon was a chaplain in the army in World War II. A group of POW's captured by the Japanese were forced to work repairing railroad lines. Following the war members of this group told him this story. At the end of each day's work the shovels were counted. One evening when the work crew was about to be dismissed the Japanese guard declared that a shovel was missing. He insisted someone had stolen it. He strode up and down in front of the men, ranting and denouncing them for their wickedness, their stupidity, and, most unforgivable of all, their ingratitude to the Emperor.

Screaming in broken English, he demanded that the guilty one step forward to take his punishment. No one moved. The guard's rage reached new heights of violence.

"All die! All die!" he shrieked.

To show that he meant what he said, he pulled back the bolt, put the rifle to his shoulder, and looked down the sights, ready to fire at the first man he saw at the end of them. At that moment one POW stepped forward, stood stiffly to attention, and said calmly, "I did it."

The guard unleashed all his whipped-up hatred; he kicked the hapless prisoner and beat him with his fists. Still the soldier stood rigidly at attention. The blood was streaming down his face, but he made no sound. His silence goaded the guard to an excess of rage. He seized his rifle by the barrel and lifted it high over his head. With a final howl he brought the butt down on his skull. The soldier sank limply to the ground and did not move. Although it was perfectly evident that he was dead, the guard continued to beat him and stopped only when exhausted. The men of the work detail picked up their comrade's body, shouldered their tools, and marched back to camp. When the tools were counted again at the guardhouse no shovel was missing.

An innocent man gave his life to save the life of the others. The prisoners said that something profound happened to them that day. Before that day, they fought and struggled with each other. After that day, they began to treat each other as brothers. Someone had given their life for them.

We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. Our elder brother gave his life for us. When we look at the cross something profound happens that enables us to treat one another as brothers and sisters in spite of all our differences.

During this series of messages I've asked each of us to pray for 4 persons who need to know and experience God's love. These are persons who need to know that God is

eager to adopt them as his children and make them heirs with Christ. In a few moments we will share in communion together. It is a time to remember that our elder brother, Jesus, loved us so much he gave his life for us. As we give thanks for what Jesus did for us, let us also pray for those who need to come home and experience God's love.