

How many of you think that today’s sermon title was my original creation? NOT! (As a pastor friend of mine used to say, ‘I haven’t had an original thought in *years!*’) Many of you are likely familiar with an epic 1965 film by the same name. Movies, as we all know, have become a very integral, influential part of our culture... as well as *memorable!* Most of us will remember lines from movies LONG after we’ve forgotten lines of Scripture... in the same way that we know movie characters MUCH better than we do Biblical ones. For the uninformed, or those a little rusty about this movie, here’s a little information:

The actor playing Jesus was Max Von Sydow, a *Swedish-born French actor* whose name sounds more *German...* playing the most famous *Jewish-born* person of all-time! (He was chosen because of being relatively **unknown** at the time, and free of **secular** and **negative associations** in the mind of the public... a man of good **character**). Other actors you might recognize: Jose Ferrer as Herod, Telly Savalas as Pontius Pilate (‘Love ya, baby!’), Martin Landau as Caiaphas, Roddy McDowell as Matthew, and David McCallum as Judas (an actor many of us know as ‘Ducky’). Of course, the most well-known actor for most of us would be Charlton Heston as John the Baptist... a ‘promotion’ from his role 9 years prior as Moses? There were a few ‘bit players’ with very minor, cameo roles that you also might recognize: Robert “Baretta” Blake... Jamie Farr (alias “Klinger”)... Angela Lansbury, Pat Boone, Shelley Winters, Sidney Poitier, and an actor whose given name was “Marion Robert Morrison”... whom we know as John Wayne. Wayne played the Centurion at the crucifixion who declared in his typical ‘John Wayne voice’-- “Surely this man was the Son of God.” (After which he did NOT, thankfully, say ‘PILGRIM’...) This was considered a bit TOO ‘cheezy’ by many... both film critics and moviegoers alike.

Here’s a few other tidbits of information about this ‘trailblazer’ of Christian movies: *The Greatest Story Ever Told* originated as a U.S. **radio** series in 1947, half-hour episodes inspired by the Gospels, and later adapted into a novel and subsequent screenplay. The producer/director George Stevens commissioned a French **artist** for over 350 oil paintings of Biblical scenes to use as storyboards. Stevens also traveled to the Vatican to see the **Pope** for

advice. The movie was shot in such 'Biblical' locations as Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah. Stevens explained his decision to use the U.S. rather than in the Middle East or Europe in 1962. "I wanted to get an effect of **grandeur as a background to Christ**, and none of the Holy Land areas shape up with the **excitement** of the **American southwest**."

Ultimately, however, all of that 'star power' and 'background grandeur' did NOT result in **popularity**. Not very well received, either by film critics or the general public. In that 50+ years since it came out, grossed under \$10 million (less than 20% of what needed to break even). Compare to "The Passion of the Christ," the film by Mel Gibson in 2004 that cost ca \$30M (about ½ of 'TGSET' some 40 years prior) and grossed over **\$600M**.

SOOOO... just WHY am I sounding more like a host for "Entertainment Tonight?" ... with information that would seem more at home on that online cinematic database, IMDb? Well, back in the 60's, this movie was an attempt to draw people from the 'small screen' (of TV) back to the 'big screen,' using a subject matter... the life of Christ... that was of great importance to a predominantly Christian nation. An objective, of course, which it failed miserably. Even if it DID include the **key aspects of Christ's life**.

Today's passage from the Gospel of Luke... part of the *original* 'screenplay' known as the Bible... is NOT a movie. Tho' it probably could be made into one. Filled with wasteful living, prostitution, sibling rivalry, lavish celebrations... this could make for a Hollywood movie with a 'feel-good' ending. While this story may not have all of the dramatic affect and 'star power' that many other famous Bible stories do... from Abraham and Isaac to Noah to Moses, to the birth of Jesus to His miracle healings and to His resurrection... I believe that it in some ways accomplishes in one small parable what that big movie production failed to do:

To point to some of the key aspects of the life of Christ, lifting up what should be important about living the Christian life... perhaps distracting our attention from the 'small screen' that so occupies our time **[hold up iPhone]**, and be more mindful of the 'big picture' of God's will for our world and our lives. Much moreso than some human movie producers' lame attempt in the 60's, this tale by Jesus of the Prodigal could truly be considered, "**The Greatest Story Ever Told.**"

In keeping with one of our foundational beliefs in the **Trinity**, there are also **three** primary 'players' in this parable: the Prodigal Son, his father, and his brother. And each one can communicate a key principle in living out our Christian faith. The first one we consider is the **younger son**.** The one who showed such disregard to his dad that he asked for his inheritance while his father was still alive... which is in effect saying 'I wish you were *dead!*' Despite this grievous insult, the father willingly gave him his portion. NO hesitation. An inheritance which he immediately went off and 'pittered' away with his lavish, wasteful, immoral lifestyle.

And it was only when he hit rock-bottom, when he realized that even his father's 'hired hands' were better off than he was, that he went back to beg for mercy. He admitted his transgressions, his SINS, against both God and his father, and confessed that he wasn't even worthy to be called his son... and would be willing to submit himself to the lowly status of a servant.

Clearly, here the importance of **humility** and **repentance** are made evident to US. We too have been given much... an inheritance from our heavenly Father. Blessings of talents and abilities, of relationships, of financial, physical, spiritual natures. Blessings which we take for granted. Gifts which we too 'pitter' away. And we too must humble ourselves before the Father... repenting of the ways that make us unworthy to even be called his sons and daughters. We too should be willing to submit ourselves to being a servant of our Lord and Master.

It is from here that we consider the response of the **Father**. Given how his child had rejected him, pursuing the pleasures of life over time with the one who provided him with so much, it would have been only natural for Dad to say, 'Well you sure got what you deserved, didn't you? NOW you come crawling back to me! It would serve you right to eat some of that pig slop you turned up your nose at before. Maybe then you can *earn back* that privilege of being called my son... an identity that you turned your back on...'

Of course, that was NOT his reaction, was it? First of all, before they even spoke, the father saw his son from a distance and ran toward him. Which meant he would have had to

hike up the garments of a wealthy landowner in order to take off running... all VERY undignified, behavior quite unbecoming a man of his lofty position.

And then, even more surprising, rather than demand explanations of his son's behavior, and promises to never do it again, the father instead expresses his great pleasure in having his son back. He calls for nice clothes to replace his tattered rags, a ring for his trembling finger, sandals for his tired feet, and food for his hungry body. The father, with no hesitation, enthusiastically demonstrates his unconditional love for his child... one who was lost, but now has been found.

It is this beautiful example of **forgiveness** and **grace** that, as we know, lies at the HEART of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. No matter how we have denied and disappointed our Heavenly Father, we do NOT receive what our sins deserve. That as we humbly come to him, truly repentant for our waywardness, he beats us to it! Our Father comes running to us, as undignified as that may be, to wrap His loving arms around us, demonstrating his unconditional love for us. A love NOT based on how we might earn it, but simply because a wayward child has returned to the parent. I think one of the most beautiful verses in Scripture puts it this way (a verse which also comes in a 'soundtrack'): ***"Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us, that we should be called the children of God."*** (1 John 3:1) A love given NOT because of the **goodness** and **grit** of our **selves**... but by the **grace** and **glory** of our **Savior**.

In all that we can learn from the 'Prodigal' Son and his 'Prodigious' Father, I think that we must not forget the 'P.O'd' Brother! Here he is, having been left 'holding the bag' all these years to care for the family business, while 'little bro' is out having a grand old time, and the little 'punk' comes back whining about how 'unworthy' he is, and Daddy, quite literally, welcomes him back with open arms! And on top of that, shows him more love and appreciation for simply 'gracing' them with his presence than he (big brother) has been shown in ALL those years for all the 'heavy lifting' done to support his father's estate. Can we BLAME him for being angry?! It JUST doesn't seem FAIR, does it?

Hmmm. 'Fair.' Does God the Father say that what we will experience in life will always be 'fair?' Was His only begotten SON treated 'fairly?' But when we stop and take a look at it, how BAD does the brother really have it, anyway? He got to spend time with his Dad, working

side by side, enjoying the fruits of their labor, and growing in their relationship together. In a way it reminds me of another parable, about the workers who received the same pay, even tho' they all started working at different times. The one who had worked the longest still got a fair wage for his labor. So too did this older brother. As the father reminds him, ***"All that is mine is yours."*** (Luke 15:31) No matter when his little brother got his, this elder brother receives yet the same inheritance.

Perhaps most importantly, what is glaringly missing from this is any gratitude that he has his brother back. As frustrating as their *past* history may have been, they now have the promise of a brighter *future* together. The way that they were **intended** to be. Though he hadn't seen it yet, his father had: that the younger brother had returned a broken, and **changed**, man. He was not the same impulsive, self-centered young man that left with riches in his pocket; he came back appreciative of all that he had left behind... with riches instead in his **heart**. And so, the elder brother needed to trust in what only the father knew: ***"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."*** (Luke 15:32) More than any FAME or FORTUNE, the elder brother was given the 'riches' of a FUTURE reunited with FAMILY.

We began this message considering how a grand cinematic creation designed to attract masses of people to the miraculous life of the Son of God failed so miserably. The truth of the Gospel, and its ability to change lives, is not one most effectively portrayed in a multi-million dollar movie... but rather, in simple stories from the Book on which all those 'screenplays' called LIFE are based: **God's Holy Word**. Simple stories like one involving a father and two of his children. As you and I, **prodigals** though we be, seek to learn from their example, may we too learn from our mistakes... **repentant** of the ways we have strayed from God's providence and love. May we appreciate how much we can be like the older brother... faithful to his Father, yet sometime frustrated by others' failures. Let us be mindful of how incomplete our knowledge is compared to what God sees... wishing, above all, that the lost will be found... that the dead come to life. Especially those closest to us...

And most of all, let us be thankful for a heavenly Father whose character is much like that in today's parable: A Father who is **patient**, and **forgiving**; who **runs** to us with arms wide

open; One whose **LOVE** for us is **unconditional**, without concern about being **dignified** or **merited**... A God who “welcomes sinners and eats with them.” The Master ‘Producer’ and ‘Director’ of the TRUE ‘Universal Studios’ works in us and through us, that each one of our lives might be... **“The Greatest Story ever told”** ... now appearing in a **Savior** near you...

CHARGE: That movie failed despite the fact that it had so many well-known ‘stars.’ Because the Christian faith is not about one’s ‘**celebrity status**’... but rather, as the director sought for the man playing Jesus: relatively **unknown**, not so much with **secular** or **negative associations**, but of **good character**: people just like YOU. As you go forth to bear witness to THE ‘Greatest Story ever told’... of **Jesus** and **His love**... know that you do not go alone...