

June 27 – “Missed Opportunities”



Special Music: “Family” TobyMac

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVG4vPPHu7c>

Luke 15:25-32

25 “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.

26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

27 ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

29 But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

31 “ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ ”

A LETTER TO MY BROTHER

Brother,

I sit in the dark this cool summer's night,
Hearth glow and candlelight
Casting shadows figures on the wall
Begging me to indulge my thoughts
And put pen to my pain.

The raucous laughter and drunken song
Destroys the serenity of the night.

A year ago, you took your leave
Gathered your blessings,
(And some of mine),
Then disappeared
Into the morning mist
Without a letter or a note,
Or passing thought
Of those you left behind.
Father broken.
Words unspoken.
Just the back of your head
And a heartbroken token
Of indifference.

Narcissistic condescension
Imaginary robes of dissension
Lead you down a path of
Self-indulgent ingratitude,

Soul and mind given
To indulgences of flesh and spirit,
Nights of wine,
Arms entwined
Seeking acceptance
In dark and musty corners
Not caring if God could see
Your new hedonic reality.

Until the day you found the cupboard bare.
Your pockets, empty.
Only dregs of a decadent
And wasted life,
Now given to feeding pigs
In fetid muds
Of hopeless,
Rock bottom misery.

Just yesterday, our broken father
Saw your hapless shadow on the road
As you slinked back into our lives,
Tail between your legs,
The reek of swine mixed
With faux and fixed humility.
Oh, what a sight and smell you were
As papa bought into your yarn
And blessed your mud-stained head
As he threw you a party
“A ring for his finger,
A robe for his grace,

A calf for the banquet,
A kiss for his face.”

While I worked the field, neath the sun’s fire.
Sweat from my brow
Leaving puddles of mud in my wake,
Arms aching from the plow.

I sit in the dark this cool summer’s night,
Hearth glow and candlelight
Casting shadow figures on the wall
Begging me to indulge my thoughts
And put pen to my pain.
You with your calf
And me without even a goat.

I won’t. I can’t. I shan’t buy
What you are selling.
Papa may be blind
To the strings on your marionette,
Your contrived embellishments
And Irrelevant developments.
But I see through your sham,
Your costume of faux humility,
Your mask of painted piety
Colors of sincerity and feathered modesty.

While beneath that mask
Is a soul that lies, sensitized to truth
Selfish to the core.

You are dead to me, brother,
My brother no more.

And so, I laid down my pen,
Closed my eyes and searched within.
Prayed to God to mend my heart
And allow me to let it go
Let grace flow
And quench the ruptured spirit
Of my soul.

I sit in the dark this cool summer's night,
Hearth glow and candlelight
Casting shadow figures on the wall
Begging me to indulge my thoughts
And put pen to my pain.
And I realize, I don't need a goat.
To know my father's love.

The bond I share
With my sibling's spirit
Is not forged of string or steel,
But love.
As my father forgives
So will I forgive
As my father gives grace
I will make a place
Where grace abounds,
Turn my nature around
And find joy

Through the death of jealousy
And by quenching the fires
Of even justifiable anger.

Peace be our bond
Love be our key
Respect be our shackle
And mercy our plea

I sit in the dark this cool summer's night,
Hearth glow and candlelight
Casting shadow figures on the wall
Begging me to indulge my thoughts
And put pen to my joy.
As I find peace
Through forgiveness
And truce to my discord
Through the presence of grace.

I don't have a brother. Well, not a brother by birth, anyway. I have many spiritual brothers and I am grateful for each and every one of them. I do have a sister, though. A wonderful, courageous, loving, beautiful, caring, gracious, child of the Most High sister, I love to the moon and back. She is so very precious to me.

Mary Alice is three years younger than me and was born while we were living in Okinawa. You know those forms that we are always having to fill out? You know the ones. Government forms, hospital forms, financial forms and so many others. Whenever you change doctors, insurance companies, banks or whatever, you are forced to fill out all new paperwork. Most of them have a line on them asking where you were born. Everyone complains the line is too short to actually fill in the place of birth. My sister has it the worst. She has to put "Uchidomari, Okinawa, Ryukyu Islands".

She had it rough in elementary school. When her classmates discovered that she was born in Okinawa, they teased her believing that she was of oriental ancestry even though she doesn't have a drop of Asian blood running through her veins. It was wrong of them to tease her whether she was Asian or not but as a young child, it made her struggle some with her identity.

She was also teased about being my sister. I knew a lot of teachers and left a somewhat oversized footprint in school, even though that was never my goal.

But everyone knew that she was Walter's sister. I know that had to be rough on her as well. People expected us to be more alike than we were.

In some ways, we have many things in common, my sister and I. We have navigated similar family issues over the years which makes for a stronger bond between us. But we are also very different in many other ways, and that has, at times led to disagreements and arguments. Some of those disagreements and arguments simmered for years and left us not speaking with each other. I would love to tell you that the arguments were petty and the disagreements silly. But they weren't. They were huge divisions to us at the time they occurred. Words were said, actions were done, feelings were hurt, all of which can never be undone by the sincerest of apologies. But I would like to think that as we have aged, we have come to realize how much we truly love each other and have done a much better job of finding balance in our lives. We have come to understand how important we are to each other. We both regret the years we wasted avoiding communication and interaction with each other.

We lost our parents while we were still maturing which left us with a gap that would have been somewhat easier if we had leaned into each other more. There are so many times that both of us have picked up the phone to call either our mom or dad, even though they passed away decades ago. Now, my sister and I

talk with each other just about every day. I think she worries about me, and I know I worry about her.

We lost so much time to our foolishness. Time is the only thing in our lives that we can't replace. No amount of money on earth will buy any of us more time. But we can't go back. We can't live waiting for tomorrow. We must embrace today, this moment, right now. Now is the time to make things right. Now is the time to embrace the joy of creation. Now is the time to rekindle and enjoy the wonder of our relationships with each other.

My sister and I have found a way to be in the "now" with each other and we have found such joy in being a part of each other's lives. My sister is... well... my sister. And I am so very proud of all that she has accomplished, although I had nothing to do with her achievements. She has overcome tremendous obstacles in her life and is wise beyond her years.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, the Bible does not tell us the final impact of the youngest brother's actions on the relationship of the brothers. We know the father was absolutely overjoyed that his son had come home. We also know that he did his best to explain to his older son why he was so very happy.

The story tells us that the older son was extremely upset, no... angry with his father. So angry in fact that he refused to join in the festivities for welcoming his brother home.

29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

It is obvious that he is not only unhappy about his brother returning but also that he is so very angry with regards to the attitude of his father. After all, how could his father allow the younger son to abuse him like that. Just like the younger son knew he had no right to ask for forgiveness, exclaim that he had sinned against both his father and God, the older son seems to be in complete agreement. I get the sense that if he thought he could get away with it, he would have driven his brother back into obscurity and made sure he never came back.

Sometimes we get so fixated on how someone has harmed us or someone that we love that we can't see the value of the perpetrator at all. He becomes obscured by clouds of anger and hurt feelings. We believe their actions to be unredeemable, and nothing will move us away from that opinion. It is the kind of anger that destroys families for generations to come. There are grandparents that have never met their grandkids. There are siblings that refuse to talk with each other for years. There are children and parents that refuse to interact with

each other, even when times are dark and the possibility of never seeing each other again is all but certain. Both parties refuse to get in the car and visit or even pick up the phone and make an attempt to make things right.

Our story in Luke ends with these two verses:

31 “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Because he has a great love for his older son, the father feels the need to justify his actions and attitude. If not justify, then at least explain. He truly wants him to understand, because he can see how hurt he is. He must feel, as parents often do, that his own joy is a source of that pain to his son. But he can't help himself. He is ecstatic that his younger son has returned home. What a struggle he must be having. “I have to celebrate the return of my son, even if doing so is so very painful for his brother.”

I know there were times when my parents had to choose which event to attend when it came to my sister and me. I never really thought about it at the time. “Do we go to Walt's championship ball game or Mary's recital? Do we go to Walt's tennis match or Mary's talent show? Do we go to Walt's concert or Mary's graduation?” Every parent has to make choices like these, and kid's simply do

not understand. Even if the parents split up so that there is at least one parent at each activity, they will still hear “Why didn’t mom come?” or “Why wasn’t dad here?” Sometimes, no matter what decision a parent makes, someone is going to be unhappy. The best thing to do is be honest and open about it.

I truly wish that Jesus had continued the story of the Prodigal Son, so that we could know if the brothers ever reconciled. The way it ends leaves me thinking that there will always be resentment between these siblings. I truly want there to be a happy ending for these brothers. I understand that it is easy to believe that it doesn’t matter, but I want to tell you that it does matter.

The reason that it matters is the whole point of this message. There is a reason this message is called “Missed Opportunities.” This discussion between the older son and the father is an opportunity for the older son to broaden his thinking and realize that not forgiving his brother may lead to a lifetime of pain and resentment.

Throughout the Bible we see opportunities for people to rebuild their broken relationships. Some of those relationships are healed. Some are never healed. Some bonds are restored. Some bonds are permanently torn asunder. But the ones that are healed, generally flourish. Both parties make a difference in the

lives of people around them by choosing to set aside their egos and their animosity for each other by taking on the mantle of grace and restoration.

Cain slew able. That was pretty much a lost opportunity.

Joseph forgave his brothers for having him enslaved. That is an embraced opportunity.

Moses forgave Aaron after Aaron created the golden calf and drew the Children of Israel away from God. They continued to do great things together.

Jacob and Essau had a tough go of it but they managed to reconcile.

James took a long time to find a true relationship with his brother, Jesus. Talk about dealing with hard relationships. It had to be so very hard on him to actually come to an understanding that his brother was the Son of God. But he did and came into his fullness as a true brother, physically and spiritually.

Jesus is such a strong believer in the importance of mending fences and repairing relationships that He says this in Matthew 5:23-24:

So, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

He is telling us in the strongest way possible that broken relationships with our brothers and sisters is damaging to our relationship with God. Heal those wounds before you decide to offer sacrifices before our Heavenly Father.

Jesus also says in Matthew 6:15:

But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

“But... but... but... you don’t know what he did to me.”

Of course, God knows. God not only knows what people have done to you, he knows what you have done to other people. In order to example Jesus, we need to forgive people for the wrongs that they have committed against us. We need to ask for forgiveness for the wrongs we have done to others. When our hearts seek to be like Jesus, when we strive to see through the eyes of Jesus, speak His words and embrace His presence, then we know that we cannot come before God with a pure heart if we have resentment or guilt that prevents us from being contrite.

Sometimes, people are not going to forgive you. It is human nature. You can’t force people to forgive you. But asking them for forgiveness is a way to cleanse our souls so that we can stand confident that we have done all we could. There were a number of Jews that resented Jesus and never offered grace or forgiveness. In fact, they ended

up killing Him. But Christ knew that His purpose was to bring reconciliation between those same people and their creator. And doing that was more important than life itself.

I love my sister, Mary. We will never see eye to eye on everything, but that will never again keep us from forgiving and loving each other. She knows that I love her. I know that she loves me. How wondrous is the grace that binds us.

Let us all avoid having Missed Opportunities to make things right with those we love. Let us never lose sight of living our lives the way God intended, with a love and grace that transcends our differences.

God bless you all!

AMEN

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