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Luke 15:11-32

1st Message

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EMBRACED BY GOD

SERIES: EMBRACING RELATIONSHIPS

September is a time of transition, and this year that transition extends to the preaching calendar. Last week John finished his series on Colossians. In October we begin a new series on Luke's gospel. In between we have the month of September. I have been allocated three of the five Sundays. I intend to use these three Sundays to talk about a mission statement. Some of you, no doubt, work for companies that have mission statements. Perhaps some of you have been involved in developing mission statements. Perhaps some of you roll your eyes and think of Dilbert, Scott Adams' comic strip which frequently mocks mission statements. The Dilbert website used to have a mission statement generator, alas now removed.

For many years I have had my own personal mission statement. It provides a framework for how I think about life, the universe and everything. It governs my teaching and preaching. This is what I seek to do:

To convey who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit; and, as a result, who we are in relationship to God, to one another, and to the world.

Firstly, this provides a framework for my own thinking, as I seek to grow in understanding by reading and studying the Scriptures and by contemplation thereon. It then provides a framework for how I seek to instruct others. Whether I am preaching, or teaching a class, or speaking in an informal setting, this is what I am seeking to do.

There are two parts: one about God and one about us. The first part concerns who God is and what he is doing, the second part who we are in relationship to others. Each part is expressed as a triad, as a set of three. Concerning who God is, there is an explicit commitment to a trinitarian understanding of God: who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit. Not expressed but implicit is an understanding of God as Father, Son and Spirit. I deliberately designed the window behind me to depict a trinitarian understanding of God. At the top is the trefoil, a symbol for the Trinity. Depicted in the window are both the Lamb, representing Christ, and the dove, representing the Spirit.

Concerning who we are, we are in relationship beyond ourselves in three different directions. We are in relationship with God. We are in relationship with one another, by which I mean our brothers and sisters in God's family. And we are in relationship with the world, where I am using "world" in the double sense in which it is often used in the New Testament: the physical world as a whole, and humanity outside God's family. These three relationships are also depicted in the window, in the form of three pairs of hands. One pair reaches up towards God. A second pair, comprising hands of different colors, reaches out in an embrace of reconciliation. The third pair reaches out to the world. Perhaps these three pairs of hands will be helpful to you as a memory aid.

It may help to make this statement more personal by replacing "we" with "I": who am I in relationship to God, who am I in rela-

tion to you, my Christian brothers and sisters, and who am I in relationship to the world. At the center of this circle of relationships is self. Around me are the other members of God's family. Beyond lies the non-Christian world. But though I be at the center of these circles I am not the focus, because I am also in relationship vertically with God. He is the focus.

These two triads are in relationship with one another. Who we understand ourselves to be in relationship to God, to one another, and to the world ought to be determined by who we understand God to be, and how we understand him to be acting, both in the past and in the present. Sadly this is often not the case. Too often our self-understanding and our relationships are driven by other factors. How should we, as individual selves, think about God, think about God's people and think about the world? These are the three topics I will explore in these three weeks.

Today's topic is "how should we think about God?" In light of who God is, what he has done, and is doing, who am I, who are we, in relationship to him? Who is God? What does that little word "God" conjure up in your mind? A.W. Tozer opens his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, with this arresting statement: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."¹

There are two other closely related questions. What do you think about yourself? And what do you think God thinks about you? Thinking about God inevitably involves thinking about self. How I see myself and how I see God are interrelated. Knowing God and knowing self are interrelated. Long ago Augustine prayed, "God... let me know myself, let me know Thee."² A thousand years later John Calvin began his *Institutes* with reference to this double knowledge, this interrelated knowledge of self and of God:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern... [T]he knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.³

True knowledge of self should drive us to seek and find God. But we can't come to true self-knowledge until we have found God. And when we find God we find that in reality he has found us. When we come to know God we find that in fact we are known by God. It is only when we find God and know that we are known by God that we have the courage, safety and security to really know ourselves.

What does it mean to know God? Many languages use two different words for "know," designating two types of knowledge: mental knowledge of a fact, and experiential knowledge of a person. English is the weaker for not differentiating these. The knowledge of God I'm interested in is not knowledge of God as a fact but knowledge of God as a person. This is an idea deeply rooted in Scripture, for the

Biblical idea of knowledge implies much more than merely knowing a fact.

Who is God? The fourth question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is God?” The answer: “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” That’s a conventional theological answer, but it is easy for such an answer to remain in the intellectual realm. I’m more interested in the knowledge of God that is relational. Such knowledge of God should transform my knowledge of self, which in turn should transform my self. So, what sort of knowledge of God is likely to transform my character?

Today I want to say three things about God. The first two concern who God is: God is God, and God is Love. The third concerns what God has done in Christ and is doing through his Spirit: he is pursuing a narrative.

1. God is God

Firstly, God is God. There’s a hymn that starts, “Great God of wonders, all thy ways are matchless, godlike and divine.” But to say that God’s ways are godlike and divine doesn’t get us very far! Nevertheless, it is important to state that God is God, not so much because of what it tells me about God but because of what it tells me about myself. God being God means that I am not God. This is very obvious, yet we so often act as if we be God.

It has been aptly said that in the beginning God made man in his image and man has been returning the compliment ever since. God critiqued the wicked in Israel, “you thought I was exactly like you” (Ps 50:21). We may acknowledge that God is God, but our actions betray us.

We give our devotion to what we have created rather than to the one who has created us. More subtly, we align God to ourselves rather than aligning ourselves to God. We are preoccupied with self, isolated in self-absorption. In these and many more ways we put ourselves at the center of the universe. Self is the great enemy of a healthy view of God. Self wants to be God. But God never made ourselves to be God. He did not create us with that capacity.

The psalmist urges us, “Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps 37:4 ESV). Douglas Carey writes, “The path to true self-fulfillment does not lie in a preoccupation with self but in selfless preoccupation with God. When the psalmist sets his heart on God, God reciprocates by making him truly fulfilled.”⁴ It is because God is God that he is great enough for us to be preoccupied with.

Self-forgetfulness is the path to freedom. Self gets in the way of my relationships with God and with people. Healthy relationships require the deposition of self. Self-forgetfulness enables me to reach out beyond myself, giving myself rather than being needy. The first one I give myself to is God, accepting that he is God and I am not. More than that, delighting that he is God, and delighting that I am not God.

2. God is Love

A second important thing about God is that he is love. The New Testament states clearly that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). But there was a time when there was only God. How could he be love when there was no one to love? Love isn’t an abstract character trait. Love is relational: it is given and received. So who did God give his love

to, and who received that love, in the beginning if there was only God? There was love in the beginning, because there was relationship within the Godhead in the beginning, or rather, before the beginning. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” In the beginning God was already there. Only God was there—that’s part of what it means to be God. The inevitable question is, “What was God doing before the beginning?” He wasn’t preparing Hell for people who ask such questions. Rather, the triune God was basking in mutual love and glory. The Father loved the Son; the Son loved the Father. There are three components to love: the lover, the beloved and the love itself. God the Father is the lover, giving himself in love to his beloved Son who lies in his bosom. God the Son is the beloved, receiving and accepting the Father’s love, secure in that love, and loving him back. Such is clear from the New Testament, especially John’s gospel. Augustine was perhaps the first to extend the concept and identify the Spirit as the mutual love flowing between Father and Son. This mutual love was glory. As the Father beamed with loving pleasure on his beloved Son, he conferred glory. As the Son accepted and returned the Father’s loving gaze he conferred glory. The triune Godhead dwelt in eternal glory before the beginning.

God knows what it is to be a Father, and he knows what it is to be a Son. He knows what it is to have a beloved Son, and he knows what it is to be the beloved Son. The Bible shows that the primary dynamic within the Godhead is love, and that the pattern for that love is the love between a father and his son. This love is the engine which drives everything.

Knowing this about God has several important implications for how I see myself. The triune God was fully satisfied within himself before the beginning. He had no need of anything else. The theological term for this is aseity: God is fulfilled from himself (Lat. *a se*). Nevertheless, he chose to create a cosmos. His aseity means that he did so not out of any need, but solely for his good pleasure. At the end of each day he looked on what he had made, and it was good. Like an artist, he stepped back and admired his handiwork.

This is very good news for how I view myself. God is not codependent or contingent. He made this cosmos not because he had to but because he wanted to. It’s an expression of his love. He made life because he wanted to. He made human beings because he wanted to. He made me because he wanted to. He liked the world he made; gazing on it with pleasure he saw that it was all very good. This is why he goes to such great lengths to redeem it, to restore it to the state when he can again beam on it with great pleasure. God as Redeemer is predicated on God as Creator; behind both creation and redemption lies God’s love. It is liberating to know that I am made for God’s pleasure. Though I am not needed by God I am wanted by him.

Augustine asked God, “Why do you mean so much to me? ... Why do I mean so much to you?”⁵ We mean so much to God because he has made us in love, he has made us for himself. God can mean so much to us only when we accept that he is God not we ourselves, and accept that he has made us in love.

Who is God? God is God and I am not. God is love and has made this world and me out of his love.

3. God’s story

Now the third thing about God: he is at work. God is, but God also acts. What is it that God is doing? He acted in the beginning, creating this world. Though he finished on the seventh day the work which he had done and rested from all the work which he had done,

this wasn't the end of his activity. He didn't step into the background after creating the world and let the world run its course. God's purposes for the world were not yet complete. What is God up to?

We have a tendency to incorporate God into our plans, co-opting him into our programs. But this is just another example of how we forget that God is God, of how we exalt self over God. But God is up to something far greater than my comfort or my success. He doesn't promise me life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He isn't at my beck and call. He doesn't promise to "bless America" when summoned to do so at political party conventions.

In May the commencement address at Tufts University was delivered by Eric Greitens, a Rhodes Scholar and former Navy Seal officer. He told the graduating students,

"The more I thought about myself, the weaker I became. The more I recognized that I was serving a purpose larger than myself, the stronger I became."

William Bennett, Secretary of Education under Ronald Reagan, commented about this speech:

Fifty years ago, Greitens' remarks would have been the norm. But through the years, the focus of education, particularly higher education, has shifted from selflessness to self-obsession. Many commencement speakers today tell students to "Dream big" and "Do what you love." It may be feel-good career advice, but it's incomplete life advice. Philosopher Martin Buber wrote, "All education 'worthy' of the name is education of character." Greitens gave the Tufts student an eloquent firsthand example.⁶

"The more I thought about myself, the weaker I became. The more I recognized that I was serving a purpose larger than myself, the stronger I became." When I think about myself, I want God to serve my purposes. But I am part of a story that is much larger than myself, a story in which I am not the center. God invites me to participate in this story.

Our Scripture reading was the parable of the prodigal son from Luke 15, which John read from *The Message* to give added punch. The setting for the parable is given at the beginning of the chapter:

By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." Their grumbling triggered this story. (Luke 15:1-3, The Message)

Rather, it triggered three similar stories: of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Each story features something that is lost, the zealous effort to find what is lost, and a great celebration when it is found. Jesus told these three stories to shed light on why he was doing what he was doing. He told them to show the Pharisees something about themselves and about God. And he told them in such a way as to challenge the Pharisees to enter the stories themselves, especially the third story of the lost sons.

The same challenge faces us. Do we see ourselves in this story of the lost sons? Do we accept that we were or still are the wayward son who wishes the father dead? Do we accept that we were or still are going our own way in life, self-focused, doing what seems best to us, trying to be God? Have we come to the end of ourselves and realized that we need to come home to the Father? And when we do turn around and decide to come home, do we have our carefully prepared speech, our list of excuses to present to the Father to show why he

should take us back? The father wouldn't allow the son to present his excuses and his plan for how to get back into his father's good graces. The son was inexcusable. But the father embraced him and welcomed him back into his family. And he celebrated his return:

"We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!" And they began to have a wonderful time. (Luke 15:23-24)

When the elder son returned home at the end of the day he heard the celebration and stormed off in an angry sulk. The father tried to reason with him,

"Son, you don't understand...this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!" (Luke 15:32)

God loved us so much that he sent his Son, whom he loves even more, to die in our place. He broke the power of sin and death so that we might be free, that we might come home. And then, when we come to Christ, he adopts us into his family as his sons. This obviously doesn't mean just males; females are adopted as well. But the father-son language is used because of all that it entails. We are deeply loved by the Father. Do you know that? I fear that most people don't. Perhaps your own childhood has left you with a negative image of fatherhood. Perhaps you doubt that God has your best interests at heart, that he has kind intentions towards you. In talking with various ones of you it's clear that many do not appreciate fully what it means to be the Father's son.

Since before there were any of us, since before there was any world, God has been a loving Father. He has always had a Son whom he loves. Though he sent that Son to die, he received that Son back into his bosom, into his warm embrace. And then, wonder of wonders, he stretched out his arms to embrace those who had turned their backs on him, those who had run away from him, those who had tried to be God on their own. Adoption as God's sons is a big deal. It's the core of our identity in Christ. This is what God has done in Christ. When we are placed "in Christ," God embraces us as his sons.

But God is up to still more. Though he welcomed us into his embrace while we were yet sinners, he is not content to leave us that way. He is at work in us through his Spirit to conform us to his Son. We were scoundrels. We still are scoundrels. But God is at work to change us. He wants us to be like his Son.

God already looks on us with pleasure. He looks on us with pleasure because he made us, but it's a pleasure tinged with much grief because we turned our back, rejecting the honor of being his children. Because of what he has done in Christ he looks on us with renewed pleasure, adopting us back into his family as his sons. As he continues to be at work in us through his Spirit, transforming us to be more and more like his Son, he looks on us with ever greater pleasure. But there is more. The day is coming when he will welcome us into his very presence, beam with pleasure on us, and say, "You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." He will welcome us into his glory, looking on us with the approving gaze of a Father on his son. He knows how to gaze this way because he has been doing it since before the beginning.

So, who is God? God is many things. But primarily God is God and God is love. What has he done in Christ and what is he doing through his Spirit? He has adopted us as his sons, and he is transforming us to be like his Son, until the day he will look on us in plea-

sure and say, “You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” It is knowing God this way that gives me the freedom, safety and security to know myself as I really am.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:1-2 NIV)

1. A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978 [1961]), 1.
2. Augustine, *Soliloquies*, Book 2, 1.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.1 (ed. J.T. McNeil; trans. F.L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:35.
4. Douglas Carew, “ānag,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 3:441, commenting on “delight” in Ps 37:4.
5. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.5 (trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin; London: Penguin, 1961), 24.
6. William J. Bennett, “A Navy SEAL’s wise advice to graduates,” CNN Opinion, May 25, 2012. Online: <http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/23/opinion/bennett-navy-seal-speaker/>.

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