“Don’t Look Back”

Sermon Title: “Don’t Look Back”
FUMC—Arlington, Texas 76011
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“Wanting to be someone you’re not is a waste of the person you are” (—Kurt Cobain).

Hear the day’s lesson:

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” 3 So he told them this parable: . . .

11b“There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

25 “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes; you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31 Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But 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 15:1-3, 11b-32).
We have heard this parable preached many times and from many points of view: father and each son. I even heard an ingenious woman preach it from the absent mother’s perspective. She ventured all the personalities would have gotten along if they had listened to a woman’s voice. Perhaps this is true. I do know that I have never heard anyone preach this story from Mike Stumbaugh’s favorite point of view: the fatted calf.

In any event, we all know how the story begins and how it ends. It is as predictable as soggy cornflakes. Some folks ask: “why plow this old ground?” The reason to “plow again” is that this parable is a portion of every person’s story. This parable has a wayward son who wants to go out on his own and find life. This parable has another son who always—and I mean always—plays by the rules, does what he is told/asked, and never strays from parental values instilled in him. This parable has an ideal parent and a quandary that faces all parents: “What shall I do and how can I be fair to each of my children without creating envy?” The father acts on his convictions, but risks alienating his sons at every turn. Instead of exploring how unlike these sons are, I suggest we ponder on a thing they hold in common.

No matter how distinct these sons are, each has a knack for “second guessing” their father. Let’s call this the curse of the “second guess.” Being second guessed means regardless of what we do, there are always those who will criticize/belittle our efforts. These “second guessers” ridicule our intelligence, undermine our authority, and impugn our motives. In short, whatever we do, someone will take issue with it. They will find fault. These two sons do this when they assume what the father does with respect to them. An Aesop’s Fables nicely illustrates this staple of second-guessing.

A Man and his son were once going with their Donkey to market. As they were walking along by its side a countryman passed them and said: “You fools, what is a Donkey for but to ride upon?” So the Man put the Boy on the Donkey and they went on their way. But soon they passed a group of men, one of whom said: “See that lazy youngster, he lets his father walk while he rides.”

So the Man ordered his Boy to get off, and got on himself. But they hadn’t gone far
when they passed two women, one of whom said to the other: “Shame on that lazy lout to let his poor little son trudge along.” Well, the Man didn’t know what to do, but at last he took his Boy up before him on the Donkey. By this time they had come to the town, and the passers-by began to jeer and point at them. The Man stopped and asked what they were scoffing at. The men said: “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself for overloading that poor donkey of yourself and your hulking son?”

The Man and Boy got off and tried to think what to do. They thought and they thought, till at last they cut down a pole, tied the donkey’s feet to it, and raised the pole and the donkey to their shoulders. They went along amid the laughter of all who met them till they came to Market Bridge, when the Donkey, getting one of his feet loose, kicked out and caused the Boy to drop his end of the pole. In the struggle the Donkey fell over the bridge, and his forefeet being tied together he was drowned. “That will teach you,” said an old man who had followed them. Aesop’s moral is this: “Please all, and you will please none.”

None of us has the luxury of not being second-guessed. It happens to all of us and it happens all the time. Notice what happens when the younger son returns. He rehearses a speech over and over again as he trudges the long road home. He says to himself, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands” (Luke 15:18-19). The younger son assumes what the father thinks and how he will feel. The Prodigal also assumes how his father will react. So, the Prodigal gets his speech in order and rehearses it persistently as he returns home.

The elder son also second-guesses the father. He knows how the father ought to treat him, the elder son, too. He voices indignity by asserting in a sizzling tone, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him” (Luke 15:29-30)!

Both sons assume they know how their father would/should react. Neither is prepared for how the father truly reacts. The younger assumes he will not be welcomed back until he does
penance. Likewise, the elder brother blurts out: “You have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.” The elder brother perceives that others always slight him. Strangely, he likely had few friends with whom to celebrate anyway.

In Jesus’ parable each son misjudges the father. Whether or not they like it, they hold this common flaw together. The younger thinks his father will be severe, but the father is not—gracious to a fault. The elder brother accuses the father of not caring enough for him, and yet the father points out rightly: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” What more could a father offer a child?

Do you ever think about your relationship to God? Do you remember the situation out of which Jesus begins this parable? Luke writes, “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’ ” (Luke 15:1-2). These Pharisees and scribes saw Jesus’ graciousness and hospitality toward those whom they considered sinners—and they grumbled.

When you think of your eternal destiny, do you think God has prepared an advanced ticket for you? Do you feel you are headed for heaven/hell? Do you ever second-guess God about your eternal deliverance? If you are certain about whether God is giving you “thumbs up” or thumbs down” then consider this thought. If, like these two sons, you second guess God then know that you may guess wrong.

Most of Jesus’ parables address the Kingdom of God. In God’s Kingdom we are never certain for whom or in what situation God’s awesome power of grace and mercy may strike. Don’t you dislike not being in control? Amen.