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BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH
ELKHORN, NEBRASKA
NOVEMBER 28, 2004
PASTOR MARK FRY

1 PASTOR MARK FRY: Thanks, guys. That's such a
2 great song. It's so appropriate today. It's kind of the
3 text that that song was written over.

4 What we are going to look at this morning is from
5 Luke 15.

6 If you have your Bibles, go ahead and get to that,
7 we are going to get to that in a few seconds.

8 I mentioned in my openings remarks that my wife,
9 Pastor Wenda, kind of brought shame upon the family by
10 confessing that we watch "The Bachelor" together on
11 Wednesday night.

12 I have further confession for you today. It's a
13 good thing we are about the business of forgiveness, because
14 my son and I on Thursdays, while Wenda is at orchestra, we
15 watch "Survivor" together.

16 I'm sorry, it's just something we do as a family,
17 and I have more confessions.

18 There's one show that I can't bring myself to
19 watch. It's "Fear Factor".

20 I've tried. I cannot go there. But the basic
21 premise of that program is that these people will do just
22 about anything for not all that much money, but the two
23 things, they are going to really scary places, dangerous
24 stunts, or they are going to eat really gross stuff.

25 So that fear factor really is kind of one of the

1 pieces I want to bring to the prodigal son story today,
2 because the prodigal son, he's off in scary place, but he's
3 also willing to eat really gross stuff.

4 We are going to get to that part of the story in a
5 minute.

6 So I want to bring that piece in and I also want to
7 bring in a piece of a TV show that we saw, we just happened
8 upon it, I didn't see any commercials for it or anything,
9 but we were surfing around.

10 Did anyone see "The Twenty-five Million Dollar
11 Hoax"?

12 Incredible, was it not? Unbelievable. They had Ed
13 McMahon on the take on that deal and they gave a young woman
14 a check for five million dollars.

15 And the premise of the show was she needed to spend
16 the five million dollars on herself in two days.

17 And she had to convince her family that she was
18 that self-centered, that ambitious, and that absolutely
19 selfish that she was going to spend every dime of five
20 million dollars on herself in two days, not share any of it
21 with her, and then she had to then come to the award
22 ceremony and she had to alienate them so far, but not so far
23 that all of them didn't come to watch her triple her money
24 in the spinning of the board thing.

25 She won. She did it. She spent all this money on

1 herself.

2 The family was furious, they were going to kill
3 her, but they weren't going to divorce her, was basically
4 what was going on.

5 They show up at the deal, spin the wheel,
6 supposedly then she wins twenty-five million dollars, they
7 are all happy because they think now I'm going to get mine
8 and the guy goes, surprise, you're not really going to get
9 it.

10 They turn it over and they gave her four hundred
11 thousand dollars and gave each one of them a laptop and all
12 this other stuff.

13 But it amazed me in the "Twenty-five Million Dollar
14 Hoax" how far people will go to ruin their families, and
15 they will blow it all on themselves.

16 Again, look at the prodigal son story. That's
17 where we are bringing in the fear factor and we are bringing
18 the hoax.

19 What we need to learn today is it's not a hoax.
20 What we need to learn today is that we are that selfish at
21 times.

22 I hope you will find yourself as one of these two
23 boys; in fact, both of those two boys.

24 Grab your Bibles. Luke 14 and 15 are the context
25 of where we are going.

1 And so just to kind of bring you up to speed, Jesus
2 is having problems with religious leaders.

3 The Pharisees and the Scribes are really having a
4 hard time with his method and his message.

5 Because what Jesus has been doing is he has been
6 really kind of rocking their boats.

7 And he has been teaching them thing like the last
8 should be first, and the least should be the greatest, and
9 when you have a big Thanksgiving meal you should invite the
10 people that aren't in your family.

11 You should invite the outsiders, the maimed, the
12 crippled, the lonely. That's who we ought to be inviting.

13 The religious people were very offended by this
14 message, because they didn't like to think of themselves as
15 lost, but been found.

16 And so Jesus was going on about this. He hits them
17 in the pocketbook in Chapter 14 where he says in Verse 33,
18 "Therefore, none of you can become my disciples if you do
19 not give up your possessions."

20 Oh, man, because the religious people in this time,
21 they had money, and that's the last thing they wanted to
22 hear, was the last should be first, and I have to give up
23 stuff?

24 I have an entitlement mentality. I'm a religious
25 person, is what they're thinking.

1 He's bursting the bubble of these religious people
2 and so what Jesus then goes on to do is he tells them in the
3 15th Chapter three parables about the lost. Three parables
4 about the lost.

5 The Pharisees and the Scribes are grumbling about
6 Jesus and the people he eats with.

7 They don't like the fact that he has widened the
8 table and he's breaking bread with sinful people.

9 We see that right away in the 15th Chapter, the 2nd
10 Verse.

11 It basically says this fellow welcomes sinners and
12 he eats with them.

13 That's the last straw. They hate the fact that
14 Jesus is not hanging with the religious people.

15 He's welcoming people that are sinners, and they
16 certainly aren't.

17 So he tells these three fascinating parables. The
18 first one is about a lost sheep in the 15th Chapter, Verses
19 3 through 7.

20 A lost coin in 15, 8 through 10.

21 And a lost son. That's the one I read at the
22 beginning of the service in 15:11 through 32.

23 In each of those parables a party ends the story,
24 and you see it if you look closely in the 15th Chapter,
25 Verse 6, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that

1 was lost."

2 15:9, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin
3 that I had lost."

4 So a party is at the end of the lost being found.

5 Now the lost son story takes place and there's a
6 party.

7 And so the question becomes, will you rejoice with
8 me or not?

9 Or is it a hoax? Is it a self-centered,
10 self-righteous, twenty-five million dollar hoax?

11 Or is it the real deal? What is your choice going
12 to be?

13 So that is kind of where we go. I hope you find
14 yourself as the younger and the elder.

15 I'm a middle child in my family. I have an older
16 brother and a younger sister.

17 And so that will psychologically explain me to some
18 of you, he's a middle child.

19 I hope you see yourself today as a middle child
20 yourself.

21 And by that I mean you need to understand that you
22 are the younger, as well as the elder.

23 Regardless of biology, we have tendencies of the
24 younger son and the elder son.

25 It's the two of us in one body. There is an old

1 song by the Beatles that kind of nails it called "The Two of
2 Us."

3 *****

4 "You and I have memories longer
5 than the road that stretches out
6 ahead; two of us wearing rainbows,
7 dancing solo in the sun, you and
8 me chasing paper, getting nowhere
9 on our way back home, we're on our
10 way home, we're on our way home,
11 we're going home."

12 *****

13 I hope you find yourself in that "The Two of Us."
14 We're almost like split personalities.

15 We are standing solo in the sun, we are chasing
16 paper, but we're getting nowhere, but we're on our way home.

17 So hopefully with this home for the holidays and
18 Thanksgiving weekend you will understand that, and I hope
19 you find yourself in the story as being home.

20 I don't care where you have been, but now you're
21 home, and you're welcome to rejoice and celebrate.

22 Let's take a look at Luke 15, page 74. We are not
23 going to spend a ton of time because we don't have it.

24 It's a fascinating story. I want you first to look
25 at the younger brother. His story is described from Verses

1 11 to 23.

2 And the first thing you are going to notice is
3 that, number one, he demands.

4 He says, father, give me my share of the property
5 that falls to me. He makes a demand.

6 Secondly, he receives, it doesn't take long, dad
7 just gives it to me and he receives it.

8 And then what does he do? He squanders it. He
9 blows it on himself, just like the twenty-five million
10 dollar hoax.

11 He blows it on himself, but we need to look a
12 little more closely at the blowing of it on himself.

13 If you look at Verse 13, he gathers all he has, he
14 travels to a distant country, there he squandered, he blew
15 it, in dissolute living.

16 A lot of people have a misinterpretation of what
17 dissolute living is.

18 It isn't alcohol, chemical, and other abuse, and
19 prostitution; it's dissolute living, which strictly is
20 defined as loose living.

21 It may have had some of that, but not necessarily.
22 This is the only time it appears in the Bible.

23 A lot of people like to jump to the conclusion that
24 it's really an x-rated dissolution that he is living.

25 But if you look strictly at the dissolute living,

1 and it's loose living, you probably would be more accurate
2 to understand that it's over-extension of one's resources.

3 It's kind of like the farmer who doesn't have
4 enough money for next year's crop, but he second-mortgages
5 the house to get that crop hoping it's going to come back.
6 It's loose living.

7 They are used to not doing that, but they really
8 don't have a whole lot of choice, they're going to roll the
9 dice and take a chance.

10 It's kind of like using the credit card for
11 Christmas stuff that you really don't have the money, but
12 you're thinking, well, grandma is going to come through this
13 year, I am going to get some money, so I'm going to roll the
14 dice and I'm going to go out there a little bit.

15 That's dissolute living. It's investing a little
16 bit more than we really have in the bank.

17 He does that. He makes poor investments. He goes
18 to this distant land, some might call it NASDAQ, and he goes
19 clear out there, you see, and he squanders it. He goes too
20 far.

21 His notes are called, the bank calls and wants the
22 money back, when he had spent everything, when he had gone
23 out too far off the cliff, then a famine hit.

24 The farmer understands this story, but he was going
25 to do the crop, he was going to mortgage the tractor and the

1 farm to get it, and then all of a sudden he's blown it all,
2 he's clear out there, and a famine hits and what happens?

3 He falls hard. So the younger brother has
4 demanded, and he has received, and he's squandered and
5 naturally consequences come in.

6 He suffers. He suffers terribly. That's exactly
7 what is happening.

8 Then he went and hired himself out to one of the
9 citizens of the country, who sent him to his fields to feed
10 the pigs.

11 There is a little irony in that, because pigs are
12 not supposed to be what you hang with in the Middle East,
13 because back two thousand, three thousand years ago, pork,
14 if it was not refrigerated and cooked properly was fatal.

15 So there is a little irony in Jesus telling this
16 story to the Jewish leaders about he was so far to rock
17 bottom he's willing to feed pigs.

18 And he has not hit rock bottom yet. He suffers,
19 but then he also stoops to the level of being willing to
20 even eat what the pigs eat.

21 He would have gladly dined upon the pods. So he
22 stoops to that level.

23 He's hit rock bottom and then some, is what Jesus
24 is teaching the audience.

25 And that's no hoax, but there is the fear factor.

1 He's willing to eat really gross stuff.

2 He has already been in real scary places. He's
3 there, he suffers, he stoops.

4 But then, miracle of miracle, he comes to himself
5 in Verse 17.

6 He comes to himself. He then rehearses his speech
7 for the old man.

8 He thinks to himself, I know what I can do. I can
9 go back, I can probably get a job as a hired hand, but I
10 better get my story straight first.

11 I know what I will do. I will go back and this is
12 the way it will go.

13 He imagines what it's like. He rehearses the whole
14 thing and so he starts heading home.

15 Before he even gets his rehearsed speech out the
16 father grabs ahold of him, sees him across, he ran, his robe
17 flapping in the breeze, loves him, gives him a hug, gives
18 him a meal, gives him a robe, the best one, a ring on his
19 finger, sandals on his feet, big feast.

20 Then the kid confesses, but notice that happened
21 first before he even confessed.

22 And then what does he do? He parties. Cool.
23 Party on, dude, you know, he parties.

24 He is whisked away into this huge celebration as
25 the guest of honor at the father's banquet.

1 I wish the story ended there. Then it's like happy
2 Thanksgiving, we are all home, home for the holiday, praise
3 be to the Lord.

4 But then we meet the other brother, and it was the
5 two, not the one of us.

6 Check him out, Verses 25 to 32. The older brother
7 is characterized by, first of all, he's working. He works.

8 He's out in the field, he works, he hears the music
9 and the dancing.

10 And then he inquires, he's like, hey, what is going
11 on?

12 I've been out here working. I've been over here
13 running this copy machine all these times and I'm hearing
14 partying in the next room. What is going on here? I don't
15 think I like it.

16 He inquires about it and he finds out that the
17 brother is back.

18 So what is the first thing he does? He clams up,
19 and then what he does is he stews in his own juices, which
20 most elder brothers are good at when the younger comes home,
21 they roll their eyes, stew in their own juices, if the old
22 man only knew where this guy has been.

23 Then he refuses to go into the party. I'm not
24 going in there.

25 The old man comes out again, you see, and what does

1 he do?

2 He says come on in, your brother is back, and then
3 what does he do?

4 He complains, he criticizes, he points out and he
5 exaggerates.

6 Notice how he does it, because elder brothers are
7 really good at this.

8 Listen, for all these years I have been working
9 like a slave for you, I've never disobeyed your commands.

10 Yet you have never given me even a young goat so I
11 might celebrate.

12 But when this son of yours, fingers pointed, he
13 doesn't even say when my brother came, this son of yours,
14 this S-O-Y, this son of yours, came back, who has devoured
15 your property with prostitutes, there's the exaggeration,
16 that's not even true, it's speculation.

17 But you see what it does, it makes him feel better
18 about himself and makes him self-righteous.

19 That's who Jesus is always telling the stories
20 about, is self-righteous people.

21 So he's doing that, he's pointing out, complaining,
22 criticizing, exaggerating.

23 And then the key piece becomes the father gives
24 this great speech.

25 Son, you've always been with me. We had to

1 celebrate and rejoice. This brother of yours, he's not just
2 a child of mine, he's your brother, he's back, we have to
3 celebrate, he was lost and now he's found.

4 Then what he does he do? I say he remains,
5 question mark.

6 His day-to-day life is his reality TV. He's afraid
7 of something, his fear factor, is it a hoax?

8 He doesn't know, but he's stewing in his own
9 juices.

10 This is the cool part, the best case and worst case
11 scenario, you get to write your ending to the story.

12 How does the story end?

13 I want to think, since it is Thanksgiving weekend,
14 that the older brother comes to himself and kind of has a
15 V-8 moment and goes, dad, you are right, I'm so sorry, I
16 have been such a jerk, I am so glad, he is my brother, and I
17 will come in, cut me off a slice of that fatted calf and
18 I'll have a little bit of beef today.

19 I want to think that's what he did. He ain't
20 heavy, he's my brother.

21 But the worst case scenario is maybe, I don't know
22 if it's more realistic, but it is more frightening, because,
23 you see, elder brothers have the tendency of remaining right
24 but not in relationship.

25 He's built himself up to be in a very safe

1 position.

2 This son of yours, he has been off blowing it, it's
3 obvious, it's as plain as the nose on your face.

4 And so he can remain right, but not in
5 relationship.

6 He refuses to dance with self-righteous
7 indignation.

8 He's probably going to stand right out and the
9 blood pressure is going up, you can almost see him, the
10 party is going on through the night, and he's over there
11 being self-satisfied and just furious and he's loving every
12 minute of it.

13 Because he's right, you see. He's righteous. But
14 ironically his fear is intimacy with the father and the
15 brother.

16 I've been working like a slave. Bingo. There's
17 the problem. You aren't a slave; you're a child.

18 He has misinterpreted the father's generosity and
19 abundance his entire life.

20 Upon closer investigation, the elder brother lives
21 outwardly with the father, but not inwardly.

22 He will not only not go into the party; he won't
23 let the old man hug him.

24 Doesn't need it. He's right, you see. He's so
25 close, and yet he's so far away.

1 Carole King kind of hit with a song in the mid
2 1970's.

3 *****

4 "Long ago I reached for you
5 and there you stood,
6 holding you again could only
7 do me good, how I wish I could,
8 but you are so far away,"

9 *****

10 That's what God is saying to his son. How I wish I
11 could, but you are so far away. You're right here, but you
12 are so far away.

13 There is no distance in the universe greater than
14 from the human brain to the human heart. So close; but so
15 far away.

16 The body language of the story is so compelling,
17 there is tears, there's hugs, there's smirks, there's
18 shrugs, there's accusation, this son of yours, the
19 finger-pointing. The body language is incredible.

20 Let's look for a minute at the father, because he's
21 not the typical father.

22 When the old man runs, the robe is flapping in the
23 breeze, which was scandalous, it was against the law
24 literally for married man with families to run. Against the
25 law.

1 But, you see, the father does not follow the law;
2 the father follows the Gospel and he seeks out those that
3 are lost.

4 Just like the coin; just like the sheep; just like
5 the son; just like every one of them.

6 Flapping in the breeze, he hugs, he gives, he
7 lavishes, he encourages, he listens.

8 Is he naive or is he divine? I suspect a little
9 bit of both.

10 He's certainly gullible. Questionable parenting
11 skills.

12 He obviously hasn't taken the tough love course;
13 yet maybe he has.

14 Pastor Wenda told me that there was an interesting
15 discovery.

16 Somebody in the office looked up the word prodigal
17 in Webster's dictionary, and so we looked it up.

18 Check this out. This is 1964 Webster's definition.
19 They have since changed the translation, by the way.

20 This is what prodigal meant. Recklessly
21 extravagant; characterized by wasteful expenditure; lavish;
22 yielding abundantly; luxuriant.

23 That's what prodigal means, but it's ironic to me
24 that that really is a description of the old man, not this
25 prodigal.

1 Recklessly extravagant. Get a robe, the best one;
2 a ring on his finger; sandals on his feet; kill the fatted
3 calf.

4 But, dad, it's the last one. It doesn't matter.
5 Characterized by wasteful expenditure; lavish. It's the
6 best feast, yielding abundantly, luxuriant.

7 Isn't that a fascinating reality TV, TG; that the
8 father is so luxuriant and so wasteful and so abundant
9 investing in people like you and me.

10 The question then becomes, hey, where are you in
11 the sorry?

12 We have got this really cool opportunity today, how
13 does your story end?

14 You get to rewrite it. You get to write it
15 yourself.

16 You are going to be served communion in a few
17 moments by college students.

18 And I am not suggesting that they are the prodigals
19 and you aren't.

20 It's the two of us. We are split personalities.
21 You are the youngers and the elders and you are not allowed
22 when you come up to have communion either to just choose the
23 ones who have UNO on their sweatshirt, or Nebraska; you can
24 go to any one of them when you come.

25 They are going to serve, because they have been

1 served. They have been welcomed home.

2 There was a great article in Christian Century. It
3 is by a guy named William Willamont.

4 He's the campus pastor at Duke university in North
5 Carolina.

6 "A while back a Duke student was telling me that he
7 and his roommate were not going along very well. I asked him
8 why."

9 "Because he's a Muslim and I'm not."

10 "I asked him how that made a difference."

11 "When we moved in together, he asked me what
12 religion I was. I told him I was sort of a Christian; a
13 Lutheran. I told him up front that my family and I weren't
14 the very best Christians, that we only went to church
15 occasionally and it wasn't that big a deal to me, but my
16 roommate has this nasty habit of asking embarrassing
17 questions."

18 "What sort of questions," I probed?

19 "Like after we had roomed together for a few weeks,
20 he asked me, why do you Christians never pray?"

21 "I told him we pray all the time. We just sort of
22 keep it to our ourselves."

23 "And he said I'll say you do, I've never seen you
24 pray once. He prays like half a dozen times every day on
25 this annoying prayer rug in the middle of our room while he

1 is facing east Durham."

2 "The last straw was Saturday morning when I came
3 home late from a date and he asked me, doesn't your Bible in
4 St. Paul say something about not joining your body with a
5 prostitute?"

6 "I told him, look, she's not a prostitute, she is a
7 Tri Delta."

8 (Laughter)

9 "I told you I'm not the best Christian in the
10 world. You shouldn't be judging me and the Christian faith
11 by my example."

12 "And I, hearing the torment in this young man's
13 voice, asked, well, how should he judge the Christian faith?
14 I ought to write to your Muslim roommate a thank you note.
15 If that Muslim keeps working on you he might make you into a
16 real Christian."

17 How would somebody judge our example? I'm bold
18 enough to think that somebody would know we were Christians
19 by the fact that we are younger and elder brothers, and
20 acknowledge the same.

21 That we would widen our table fellowship; that we
22 might not be so self-righteous, but rather
23 self-relationship making about those that come to the table
24 with us.

25 So we have these beautiful examples today of some

1 college kids coming up to serve us, because they've been
2 served.

3 We're glad they are home for the holidays, because
4 here's the deal, guys.

5 Fear is no longer a factor. You don't need to be
6 afraid anymore.

7 God has conquered the darkness by the life, death,
8 and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

9 It's not a hoax. It's not a hoax. You are a
10 survivor, because of what this batchelor, this Jesus has
11 done for you.

12 So I welcome you to the table today. We are going
13 to go right into it actually.

14 I'm going to say a prayer and do the elements here
15 and then we are going to have these fine young people serve
16 us.

17 Let us pray. Gracious God, we thank you that we
18 can be younger and elder and forgiven. Some of us are
19 parents, Lord, and we wonder about our parenting skills, so
20 would you give us some guidance from above about properly
21 investing in our children as the future.

22 Thank you, Lord, for bringing us together today and
23 inviting us to rejoice and eat together, for we don't
24 deserve it, and yet you want it.

25 Bless us now with table fellowship in the name of

1 Christ. Amen.

2 We remember our Lord Jesus and how on the night in
3 which he was betrayed he took a loaf of bread. When he had
4 given thanks he broke it, gave it to his disciples and said,
5 take and eat, this is my body, it is given for you for the
6 forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me.

7 After supper he took the cup, and when he had given
8 thanks he gave it for all to drink saying this cup is the
9 New testament in my blood. It's given and shed for you for
10 the forgiveness of your sins. Do this in remembrance of me.

11 Let's pray together. Our Father, who art in
12 heaven, hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be
13 done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this daily our
14 daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive
15 those who trespass against us, and lead us not into
16 temptation, deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom
17 and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

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