

The Hands of Forgiveness

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church March 30th, 2025 – Luke 13:11-32)

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The story Luke gives us today is one we know well. The prodigal, the lost or the wasteful son.

The younger son demands his share of inheritance, is given it, takes off to explore the world and ends up after wasting it all on the high life and ends up penniless and hungry. Returning home, he is not sure what will happen, but he finds his father running out to greet him, his father then embraces him and gives him a new cloak, a ring and a party. The older brother who has stayed home and worked the farm, wonders what all the commotion is about, discovers what has happened and finds himself unable to move beyond his jealousy and can't bring himself to join the celebration. The father is overjoyed his son has returned, but also tries to help his other son join in the celebration.

We are invited to find ourselves in the story.

To help us do that I want to look at the story using Rembrandt's painting of it. You have a laminated copy to look at and the pictures we also be up on the screen.

Take a few moments to look at the picture.
Who in the picture are you drawn to?

Perhaps you are drawn to the younger son?

The son who squandered all he had been given and has been reduced to a shadow of his former self. He knows he has brought disgrace on his family, and here he is now on his knees, leaning into his father, as he would have when he was a child, needing the reassurance his father now gives.

Shabbily dressed, in rags, looking like a beggar – revealing how things had ended up for him.

A shaven head, much like a prisoner would have had.

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His feet – calloused, one shoe completely wrecked, the other no longer on his foot. Signs of the long journey he has made.

However, he still carries his short sword, a sign of his connection with his family, his home and his father.

He is no longer pretending, he understands himself to be destitute, but we also see how much he is loved despite what has happened. He has remained the Father's son despite what has transpired.

Perhaps you are drawn to the older son, to the brother?

Standing tall, upright, stern, hesitant, closed to being able to change his opinion just like his hands. He seems very controlled, perhaps keeping his emotions and anger in check. He is dressed in similar clothes to the father, he bears a resemblance to his father. In the story we are told he doesn't come into the party, to see his brother, but Rembrandt has painted him into the picture, albeit at a distance. He is just as lost as his brother – lost in his jealousy, lost in his bitterness, lost in his judgementalism, lost in his disapproval. We are left wondering if he will ever respond to his father's invitation to join in the celebration.

Perhaps you are drawn to some of the other characters who are in the shadows?

The man seated

Sometimes Rembrandt painted himself into his art. Here he is seated. We think he symbolises the tax collectors whom Jesus has been criticised for hanging out with. Rembrandt had himself been bankrupt so perhaps he identifies with the tax collectors. This character is beating their breast, knowing his need for forgiveness, perhaps offering his confession. But, he still remains at a distance, not quite ready to accept forgiveness.

The woman next to him.

She stands between the man seated and the father. She is looking at the scene. She is curious, she is interested, but not ready to participate, to join the scene. Who is she, perhaps a maid?

Or the woman you can barely see above the father.

She appears so far away, just watching. Is she too overwhelmed or emotional to involve herself in the scene? Who is she, perhaps the mother of the son, watching and waiting to see what will happen?

All three stand in the shadows, watching, observing, interested spectators. Amazed perhaps at the grace revealed in the father's embrace of the wayward son?

The focus of the story and the painting is of course the father.

An old man, stooped over, embracing his son. The son he thought he had lost for good. Here, he is encircling him with his cloak, sheltering him.

His eyes, they look tired, perhaps they are filled with tears, they are full of compassion, looking at his son.

His hands – old and stiff looking but each one quite different. One strong and muscular holding his son. The other softer, tenderly consoling and comforting his son.

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He doesn't care that his fancy clothes are absorbing the dirt and grim from his son's clothing, or what is left of those clothes.

We have no sense of what has happened before this encounter, we can't see the worry he has carried for a long time, wondering if his son was dead or alive. We can't see his exhaustion of having run out to greet his wayward son, or can we? We can't see how he did not care what anyone thought about an old man running out to greet his son, we can't see he doesn't care that such an act looked so undignified.

We can't see in this picture his desire for his other son to come and join in the celebration? We can't see how he chases after this son just like he had with the younger son.

Perhaps what we see here is the Prodigal father – prodigal means wasteful. Here we have a father who has wasted his wealth on a son who need to explore the world, to assert his independence but who does not ask for him to pay it back. Here we have a father who wastefully loves both sons, both sons who in their own ways have initially rejected his love and are lost. Here we have a father who wastefully offers compassion, mercy and forgiveness.

Look again at the picture again, do you see it differently now? Are you drawn to a different character this time?

Are you a bystander, to whom the father says allow yourself to be embraced in my love?

Are you the older son, to whom the father says come, I have always loved you, come and be embraced by my love?

Are you the younger son, to whom the father says I have always loved you, you are forgiven, come and remain in my love?

As we grow in faith, can we begin to love as generously and wastefully as the father, welcoming all, showing compassion to all, forgiving all, celebrating with all, no matter who they are or what they have done. Amen.