

11/22/17
Week 48: Fall Mission Feeding
Wednesdays in the Word: Sheila Walsh
The Prodigal Son #1

Sheila: Hi! I'm Sheila Walsh. Welcome to *Wednesdays in the Word*. I love that I get to do this. You know what's really fun for me? Most weekends I'm out on the road and then I get to meet some of you. So many of you have said either, "I set my D.V.R." or "I never miss this program." I just want to say thank you. Thank you for those of you who have written encouraging little notes or just taken time to say, "That really touched my life."

Remember, we are here for you too. If you're struggling in your own life, if you feel alone, the whole -- everything that we do here is to communicate the love of God to whoever you are no matter what is going on in your life right now.

I was thinking recently about when my son Christian was little, when he was just a little boy someone bought him a puzzle. The pieces came in a wooden box with a picture of three bears in funny costumes on the cover. And inside there were probably about 40 pieces to choose from so you could make the bears look different. Every time you put the puzzle together you could choose different heads or jacket or shoes. He had a lot of fun with that and made some very strange looking bears.

But one night after Christian was fast asleep. I came across the puzzle. He had pushed it under the couch; I think that was his version of cleaning up. I saw the way that he left the bear. It was hilarious; this bright yellow jacket and a pink shirt and a cowboy hat. I looked at that for awhile and I thought you know what? Sometimes I think that's kind of what we do with God. We make up our own puzzle piece of what we think he looks like. We paste onto God images from our past that might have been your dad's temper or your husband or wife's disapproval. It might be the way your mom criticized you or it might be some legalism that you picked up in church. We add things that we hear at church, what we remember if you ever went to Sunday school or what somebody once told us about God. We take the good things and the bad things, the things that are true and the things that are maybe lies but we believe them and we make up our own puzzle of what we think God looks like.

But here's the sad thing. When we live with distorted images of God it makes it almost impossible to completely trust him. I think God wants us to throw open our arms unreservedly because he is our Abba Father.

So what do you, what do you right now if you're in a place where you're thinking, I want to trust God but I don't like how this puzzle looks. Well, one thing I know for sure, God through the power of his living word can help us change a distorted picture into a picture of who he really is.

Think about it. God's word is full of encounters people had with the love of God in Christ whether it was the woman caught in adultery or the woman at the well. One encounter with Christ changed everything for them. The look they saw in his eyes changed everything.

I think throughout human history we've struggled to trust God completely. Now I don't know where you are in your own journey right now. Perhaps for you God is very close and that you really get it -- that you're loved. But perhaps that's not where you are. Perhaps you feel far away right now. Maybe even hurt or confused when God didn't seem to answer your prayers. And you think, I don't think God cares about me and you've just walked away. But I want you to know this. Even when we go to the ends of the earth in an effort to run away from God there is always, always a way home and a Father waiting for us.

So today, I want us to look at a story that Jesus told to illustrate that no matter how far we run, when we finally turn our faces back toward home we discover that God's been waiting for us all along.

So let's look together at Luke's gospel, Luke Chapter 15 and I'm going to be reading verses 11-24 and I'm reading from the New Living Translation. So here we go.

Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land and there he wasted all of his money in wild living.

"About the time his money ran out a great famine swept over the land and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, at home even the hired servants have food enough to spare and here I am dying of hunger! I'll go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'

"So he returned home to his father, and while he was still a long way off his father saw him

coming. Filled with love and compassion he ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.' But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began."

Well, I don't know about you but I've been familiar with this story since I was a child, perhaps you have as well. In Sunday school we always called it "The Story of the Prodigal Son." But I don't think that's an accurate title for the story. In some ways it is the story of two lost boys who totally missed the point of what it means to be a son.

But I think -- I think the story is really about the father. It is a story about the depth of the father's love for each one of us. It's really important to place the story back in its historical context and understand what those who are listening to Jesus tell the story that day what they actually heard. When we do that, we see a very different picture and one that's honestly just about as good as it gets down here.

I am a huge fan of the writer, Kenneth Bailey. He is a lecturer on Middle East New Testament studies and is also professor emeritus in Jerusalem. He is regarded as one of the finest experts in unlocking the cultural keys of Luke Chapter 15. You might remember Luke 15. You have the lost sheep, you have the lost coin, and then this story of the lost boy.

Well, his writings have helped me understand more about these two sons and deepened my understanding of the magnitude of God's love for us his children and how willing God is to get his feet dirty in pursuit of our hearts even when we have broken his.

So let's look at this. The younger son asks, "Father, give me my share of the estate." That was an outrageous request. In Middle Eastern culture this was equal to saying, "Father, I wish you were dead." Can you imagine if your child said something like that?

Now the son was unmarried so probably he was probably about 20 so his dad was not an old man close to death but a man in the prime of his life. There was no greater insult in that culture. Think of the implications of what he was asking for. His father was clearly a wealthy man with a lot of land. Those who are listening to the story would have expected that Jesus would say the father slapped the son across the face for making such an devastating request.

Well, not only does the father in the story not do that, he agrees to the son's request. He divides his property up between his two sons. Then the insult gets much worse. The boy sells the property and leaves the country. Now in Jewish culture he was now officially dead to the family.

You actually hear that at the end of the story. You remember the father says, "My son was dead and now he is alive again."

So the boy leaves and spends the money living in luxury. Some translations imply that he spent it in living immorally but that is actually not supported by the original text. He just lived it up for as long as he could until the money ran out.

So what was he going to do? What now? Go home? Absolutely out of the question. He knew that a ceremony would be waiting for him at the village gate if he ever tried to go home. If a Jewish son disgraced his father by selling his land, taking his money and losing it, particularly to Gentiles he was no longer considered a son. And if he ever tried to return home he would be met at the village gate by men carrying a large earthen jar filled with burned nuts and corn. They would break it at his feet shouting out, "This boy is dead!" And he would be cut off from his own people forever.

Now the prodigal son knew -- he knew the consequences of disgracing his father. But he did it anyway. Don't you think it's amazing how reckless we can be with our lives at times? We're all, every one of us sinful and flawed. It is easy to point the finger at someone you think is doing something worse than you've done. But Paul, do you remember when he wrote to the church in Rome? He put it this way, "All have turned aside. Together they have become worthless. No one does good, not even one."

So the boy tried to find a job. He knew the only way he could save face was by returning the money he had spent. If he could get all that money back and buy back his father's land then the possibility of being forgiven was there. But he was to discover the painful reality that friends who were there when you had a lot of money are scarce when your pockets are empty. No one, not one person gave him anything. He ended up doing a job that would be repulsive to a Jewish son -- feeding pigs.

Well, his job barely fed him. He had no hope. He was absolutely out of his own plans. Have you ever been there? Have you ever been in a place like that where you just cannot see one possibility of hope? You can't see how from here can I move forward?

Well, this is where the story gets even more interesting to me. I always thought that in his misery this selfish boy truly repented of his bad behavior and humbly went home. Well, that doesn't seem to be the case. Think about the way Jesus tells the story. It's the final story as I said of a trilogy. He tells the story of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and finally, the lost son. In the first two stories the shepherd went after his sheep and the widow went after her coin. So what about the lost son? Did he really come home repentant all by himself?

Well, Kenneth Bailey points out something very important. He says his speech sounds contrived. Remember what he said? "I will go home to my father and I will say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you. And I'm no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'"

When these told these three parables, each one further underlined the point of the previous one. If the prodigal came to his senses all by himself, then Jesus contradicted what he taught in the first two stories. Kenneth Bailey suggests that when Jesus used the analogy of a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, it had the effect of reminding us of one of my favorite Psalms, Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me by quiet waters. He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

I studied Greek in seminary but I avoided Hebrew like the plague because it is so hard to learn. But I studied just a few words. And the Hebrew for he restores my soul is: Nafshi yeshobeb. This is what it means: He brings me back; he causes me to repent.

This is what I believe Jesus was saying God brings the boy back. The boy did not repent on his own. His speech was one of manipulation. A number of actual Aramaic translations translate it this way: He got smart, or when he came to his senses. We're so like children who think we can weasel our way out of bad behavior with nice sounding speeches.

But here's what I love. Even though he came home with this, let's-try-and-sound-humble speech his father didn't want his speech, he just wanted his son back and he had been waiting for him all along. So he returned to his father, and while he was still a long way off his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion he ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.

What a beautiful image! It would be shocking to the listening crowd that the father ran. That would never happen in Jewish culture. It was undignified for a man of his stature to run. But Jesus was saying that's what God's love is like. Even if we have slapped God on the face and walked away, he's been watching and waiting all along for us to come home.

See the father wants to get to the boy before the villagers can. Before they're able to act out the ceremony saying, "You're dead to all of us," the father reaches the son, throws his arms around him, and welcomes him home. He doesn't even ask what he did with the money. He just throws a party to celebrate my son was dead and now he is alive.

This is grace. This is the love of God. It reminds me of the hymn, Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see. I want you to know there is always a way home to God. No matter where you've been or what

you've done, he waits to welcome you home.

I don't know how that sits with you today. Perhaps you're just flicking through channels and you stopped because you thought, there's a woman with a funny accent. But I want you to know, I don't care what you've done up until this moment in your life that God is not some distant deity, he is a very personal father. God is not looking for religion. God is looking for relationship.

Maybe you think you've wandered too far away from home. I talked to a young girl just a few days ago and she said, "I grew up in the church and I used to be part of the youth group. I went to everything and then I experimented with a few things. And then I found myself just really hooked on drugs. I found myself selling my body on the street." She said, "I just don't know how I got so far away."

But she said, "Then one night I was wandering past," she said, "It just looked like a convention center and there was music coming out." She said, "I just kind of wandered up the steps and I listened." She said, "I don't actually know what the meeting was about but they were singing this: Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind, but now I see." She said, "I realized even I could come home."

You know the amazing thing? When you do come home to the father you have such a desire to reach out to others who are still out there and their needs might be different but they're very, very real. Would you watch this with me?

On the mission field

Sheila: This young mom is a widow. She's already buried three children. She has two left. They're simply asking for a decent meal a day.

>> Sheila, this is an exciting day because this is Paulina. You came with us last year and you talked to her and you interviewed her and she told you about her children and how weak they were and how they couldn't go to school. And the worst part, she had lost three children because of hunger because she just didn't have enough food.

But today I've seen a smile on her face, her children are eating. Mission Feeding has come to this village. The people that watch *LIFE Today* have made it happen. Paulina has new life and she now knows these children will live.

Announcer: Today, each of Paulina's two surviving children have been stabilized with a daily bowl of food. Thanks to the compassion of *LIFE Today's* viewers we were able to bring Mission Feeding to all of the children in Paulina's village.

Open Captions:

>> We're very grateful to the people who have sent us food. When you last came, children were not well enough for school. But now, everyone's coming to school because they have something to eat.

Announcer: If you gave to Mission Feeding in 2016 you literally helped save these children's lives. Paulina's story testifies to the impact you can make on a child and the mother desperate to keep her child alive. Right now drought and famine have devastated areas across Southern Africa and more children are dying. When you give to Mission Feeding, you give life!

End of clip**In the studio**

Sheila: What a hope-filled story! I remember so clearly the day that I met Paulina, a year before Janice was there. I remember that night we were camping in their village and I was in a tent. I remember that night just weeping, thinking of what it must be like as a mom to have to bury not just one child -- so many of the moms in these villages have buried two and three children.

When I saw this piece, when Janice got back and I saw Paulina and the look on her face is so transformed. She used to be desperate and now there is this look of peace, of joy, of happiness, of knowing her prayers were heard. The thing that really strikes me so much about our Mission Feeding, because at the moment we feed about 400,000 children, is that just as we came in to Paulina's village and changed their lives.

Did you hear what she said? "Now all the children are going to school." That's the amazing thing. We feed the children at school so they will come to school and not only get a good meal but they'll get an education and it totally breaks that cycle of going from death to life. And it is so doable!

For those of you who have given before, thank you so much! But let's all up our game this year. Do you realize that for \$30 you can feed three children for three months? \$50 you can feed five children for three months; \$100, 10 children. So please let's all do something.

I actually wanted to make a special ask today. I want you to consider giving an additional gift for a food factory upgrade. We have an incredible factory in Africa that produces our food but it's outdated and once we do an upgrade it's going to change what we're able to produce. It will be up by 50% -- so much more efficient! To do the total upgrade it's \$216,000. So I was thinking, what if 216 of us gave \$1,000? So I'm going to be one of them. So would 215 of you join me so that

we can do this factory upgrade and get as much as food to as many children as possible?

Now for some of you, that's not possible. I understand that. But if every single one of us does something then slowly village by village by village we're going to see hope return to mothers' eyes. If this was an impossible situation then we would all just wring our hands and say, "What can we do?" But we've discovered yeah, there is something that we can do and we can do it now.

I can't wait to go back to these villages and see the difference in the lives of these moms and these children. But it will only be different if you and I decide today we're going to do something. So please, would you go to your phone, dial the number on your screen? Give the best gift you can possibly give and let's feed these children and give them life.

Begin video clip

Announcer: In impoverished and famine-stricken areas of Africa, children are suffering. The need is great. And without food, they face death by starvation. With your support, you will help feed and care for children in crisis areas of Sudan, Angola, and Mozambique.

With Africa facing ongoing food shortages and drought, we urgently need to replenish supplies and come to the aid of 400,000 children counting on us. Your lifesaving gift of \$30, \$50, or \$100 will help feed and care for three, five or ten children for the next three months. Please also consider an additional gift to help provide critically needed upgrades to our food factory that will increase overall production by a staggering 50%. This is a \$216,000 challenge above our normal feeding budget that could help save even more lives.

With your gift of any amount we'll send you *In the Middle of the Mess*. In her new book, Sheila Walsh brings insight to knowing the peace and presence of Christ in the midst of life's inevitable messes.

With your gift of \$100 or more to help feed and care for ten children, we will send you Sheila's book, plus the "Arise" coffee mug. This heat-activated mug reveals Isaiah 61 each time you fill it with a warm beverage; a wonderful way to begin your day.

And finally, with your gift of \$1,000 or more to help feed and care for 100 children, be sure to request our "Determined Eagle" bronze sculpture. Please call, write, or make your gift online.

End of clip

On the mission field

James: The reason the food is there is because people like you didn't change channels, didn't look away, didn't think only of yourself. You said, "I can feed three or five or ten -- that's the reason that we're able to keep feeding -- that's the reason we're feeding now in many areas at schools instead of refugee camps where they're dying. We're also meeting the crisis need but we're doing this now because we're giving the children health for the future.

And I want to thank you from the depth of my heart for not just channel surfing, going on or turning away. I'm asking you today to respond right now and you dial that telephone number or you go online and say, "I'm going to care." If you can care for ten, there are a lot more than ten here. \$1,000 would care for 100 for the next few months. But \$100 will care for ten, \$50 will care for five, and \$30 will care for three. So please, don't sit there and watch. You can thank God for what you're seeing but let's make it possible for people to thank God for what you did. I thank God and I thank you.

In the studio

Sheila: Thank you so much! And for any gift at all we will send you my new book, *In the Middle of the Mess*. My friend Kay Warren wrote, "If you've ever told yourself I can't do this one more day," please read this book.

If you are able to send us some more there are some other gifts that we would love to send to you. But more than anything, I know that for those of you that have been faithful partners for so long, you just want to make a difference. So you and I together can change this world one child at a time.

Thank you so much for being with us. See you next time.