

Message: “When God Ran”

Do you have problems with your electronic devices? I do.

Esperanza can verify this is true. We use Alexa at home to turn our lights on and off or play music. This is particularly helpful late at night when we don’t want to get out of bed to turn things off.

My problem? Alexa ignores me. For some reason, when I ask them to turn the lights off, they do. And then they turn them back on again. I have to repeat myself – more than once!

And when I ask Alexa to turn the music off, they ignore me entirely. As you can imagine, this doesn’t go so well. I don’t appreciate being ignored by an electronic device. Esperanza tells me I have the wrong attitude. I need to face the device, speak slowly, loudly and clearly. And so, I do, but it’s kind of annoying every night.

The same is true with Siri on my cell phone. I’m usually startled when Siri speaks to me since the device seems to ignore my voice.

What makes me suspicious is Esperanza doesn’t seem to have the problem. She talks to Siri and Siri talks back. She asks Alexa to turn lights and music on and off, and the device responds promptly. Hmmm.

Maybe our attitude matters. It shapes the way you talk. People, and electronic devices modeled on the way people behave, may respond better when we listen, are polite and face them as we speak.

But what do we do when someone ignores what we say?

No matter how respectful we are, how valuable we think our advice is, or how we approach someone, there are times when we are ignored.

This reminds me of Jesus’ parables in Luke 15. Jesus was confronted by the do-gooders of his day, the Pharisees, because he was seen in the company of people from the wrong side of the tracks. You know who they are, those who are seen as colluding with the opposition, those who live in an improper way, those who do wrong and seem to ignore it, those who are hurt, abused, marginalized and oppressed and don’t “just get over it.” The people who you don’t expect to show up in church and wouldn’t welcome if they did.

Jesus knows what’s going through our minds. So, he teaches us about God’s mercy and grace by telling three parables.

The third parable is a familiar story. We call it the Prodigal Child, though perhaps it should be called the Prodigal Children. It's a story about wanting and searching for what seems lost but is always within reach when we're ready to find it.

Have you ever felt a restlessness you couldn't define? I certainly have. And I think a lot of people feel this way. We have trouble settling down. We get up, go out, come back and then sit down again. We have trouble sleeping. We want attention, and we don't want attention. We want something we can't quite identify. We don't seem to be in pain, just driven, searching for satisfaction we can't find. We're looking for something, wanting something we can't articulate. There's something driving us a little crazy. This is what it feels like to be lost.

Maybe it was the madness of wanting that drove the younger child to make an outrageous, offensive request. They effectively said to their parents, "Why aren't you dead yet? Your value to me is in the stuff that will be mine one day, not in you." If there was ever a child who acted out, it's this one. But they weren't punished. To their surprise, they got what they asked for. The parent did what no parent would do. They broke the bank, broke tradition, broke open their wallet and took it all out.

And the younger child, the first prodigal, ran away as fast as their feet would take them. They ran to satisfy the wanting. And they tried everything their fevered brain could think of. But nothing slowed down the wanting. They kept trying, kept searching, kept digging the hole deeper and deeper, until they had to look up to see rock bottom.

We can give them credit for going all out. The wad their parent handed over evaporated like drops of sweat on a hot sidewalk. They watched their fortunes fade as they plodded along, the hunger as strong as ever, the wanting unabated, unsatisfied, still driving them on. Until, knee deep in a pig sty, they had a "ah, ha" moment.

The wanting changed. Jesus said, "*They came to themselves,*" and their desire became deeper, more real ... within reach. Instead of wanting something indescribable, they wanted something they knew well, something they'd experienced. They came to themselves and wanted what they'd already had and thrown away. Grace.

They knew they didn't deserve it. But they took a risk and decided even a taste of what they once had was better than this. They couldn't have it all and were okay with that. They'd take the consequences, suffer indignity, because they were done with wanting. So, they made the long journey back home, leaving their madness behind. Hoping for mercy.

But a strange thing happened. God, or should I say, their parent ran to meet them, gathered them up, and treated them as though nothing had happened. Before they even said a word. As though they were a beloved child. As though they belonged. And they were swept up into the party, welcomed home, where they had all they ever wanted. End of story.

Not quite. The older child, the one left behind, the second prodigal, chewed on their frustration with the younger every day as the older marched out to work. And their satisfaction in their work, their home and their family evaporated like drops of sweat on the hardpack they struggled with.

The older one stumbled back, tired on that day, the day of change, feeling anything but transformed. When they heard the news, their face became even harder - bitter, like they'd eaten a sour apple. God, or should I say, their parent found them this way, spitting seeds and hatred, and begged them to come in and celebrate. But they refused and said, "I've slaved for you all these years and you never gave me anything."

Wait a minute. Look again. "*They divided their property between them*" (Luke 15:12). The older one got theirs, too. Every day, it was theirs. Everything was theirs, a double share because they were older. And hopefully more mature. But they never saw it. They never claimed it. They lived and could have enjoyed their portion every day. They could have had lots of parties. That's what their parent told them. But their bitterness, their jealousy kept them from claiming it, from living it.

All the older one found was their wanting. What we'll never know, because Jesus didn't tell us whether the older child ever came to themselves. The younger child needed starvation to be able to leave their madness behind. Let's hope the older child only needed the threat of losing their family to move from wanting to generosity, from turning inward to pouring outward, from judgment to forgiveness. Like the loving parent, our God, who loves perfectly and unconditionally.

God doesn't require an interview for salvation. God doesn't look at our financial records, status or social media. Jesus isn't prejudiced or partial, judging or grudging, bitter, deaf to our cry, or blind to our need. He knows who we are, what we are, and loves us in spite of ourselves. God doesn't record how you failed last year. It's not even on the books. We are forgiven when we return home.

Sure, in our minds, there are lots of reasons why God wouldn't call us. We can have a bad attitude. We can surrender to our desires. But if we hunger for something more, for something to fill the void in our soul, Jesus will save us and make our lives meaningful no matter who we are, where we've been, what we've done, or the fact that we aren't perfect. This is what it means to hunger for love.

The question isn't whether God will accept and love us, it's whether we can forgive ourselves, open up and embrace love, even to the point of loving those who say and do terrible things to us. When we want love, we can find it with Jesus.

This sounds wonderful! Then real life interrupts the fairy tale. The prince and princess don't always live happily ever after. Children are raised in broken homes. Abuse, prejudice and injustice really happen. People lose jobs, homes and families. Those who are sick or less able are put aside, neglected and seemingly forgotten. Life is full of frustration and disappointment.

What a blessing it is to know God is with us, pouring grace and mercy upon us every step of the way. God loves you, me and our neighbors. God only wants the best for us. At any moment, we can turn to Jesus, be filled with grace, and have the God-sized hole in our soul filled so we are whole and complete. When we truly embrace the love of God and return God's love by sharing it, that's when we are transformed.

And we find hope. We're part of the family, God's beloved child. We're welcome with open arms. And yes, God will run to meet you and give you a great, big hug before you say a word.

The hope we share comes with the gift of eternal life. But the hope of Jesus is more than life after death. The kingdom of heaven is here and now, though it isn't fully realized. Jesus brought it through his incarnation, giving us life – here and now. This isn't about prosperity, but the hope and promise of a changed life, a new life. We are found.

Every life teaches us something, offers us something: a chance to love more, care more, give more, share more and be more. And we can rest knowing the abiding hope that the lost are found.

Let hope guide your steps as you return. Welcome home!

Let us pray ...

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (CEB)

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Jesus told them this parable:

Jesus said, “A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the inheritance.’ Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.”

“When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, but I’m starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.”’” So he got up and went to his father.”

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.”

“Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant replied, ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.’ Then the older son was furious and didn’t want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. He answered his father, ‘Look, I’ve served you all these

years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you've never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.' Then his father said, 'Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.'"