

Preached by Senior Highs  
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, Virginia  
April 13, 2008 – YOUTH SUNDAY

John 6:35, 8:12, 10:7–10, 10:14–15, 11:25–27, 14:6–7, 15:5  
Luke 15:1-10  
Luke 15:11-32

## SENIOR REFLECTIONS

*A sampling of sermons preached by our seniors on Youth Sunday.*

### **Lucy Hedley:**

Growing up, my parents have always tried to be as fair as possible with my sister and me: We would get the same thing for Christmas, get the same allowance, and be allowed to go to the same number of summer camps. Still, as I got older I began to realize that this was not always the case in the real world.

Countless times I have been told, “Life isn’t fair”; and let me tell you, it certainly feels that way sometimes. Whether it is simply jealousy for what someone else has or doesn’t have, or an injustice against you personally, life often feels unfair and unjust. Sometimes it seems as though you do everything that you think is right and receive nothing for it; while others, who have not tried as hard or have done something wrong seem to get everything their way.

Given the timing, my recent complaints about these kinds of things have been about college and the whole admissions process in general. It is this admissions process that has brought new meaning to the phrase “life isn’t fair.” Kids who maybe don’t seem like they deserve to get in are getting in for various reasons including ethnicity, connections with the college, and as athletes, while other bright students are getting rejected.

One such story really seemed to bring this message home. In my sophomore year of high school, the swim team went to the state swim meet for the weekend. Several of the older students had brought alcohol with them; and Kate, one of my classmates, ended up drinking with them one night. They were caught and reported to the Disciplinary Board. When testifying to the Disciplinary Board, all the students except my classmate lied about drinking. As a result, everybody except her got let off the hook. She, on the other hand, was suspended for violating a major school rule. As you all know, having a suspension on your record is not good, and everyone assumed that this would severely hurt her when it came to college applications. After all, it was only fair. Still, when April 1<sup>st</sup> rolled around she was sent a big package welcoming her to UVA, one of the most selective public universities in the country. Although I was happy for her, I was also kind of annoyed: how was it fair that someone who had been stupid enough to drink at a school event was getting into the same places that I was, when I had done everything right?

Upon further inspection, this story is just like a modern version of the parable of the lost son. The younger son, who would be like Kate in the story, went out and did stupid things, wasting all of his inheritance. The older son, however, stayed behind, worked hard and did the right thing. When the younger son had completely run out of money, he returned home. Upon his arrival he, like Kate, admitted his shortcomings and willing to take the consequences, offered to be treated like a servant in the fields. Rather than scolding the younger son, however, the father threw his arms wide open and welcomed him home (while Kate didn't have a father welcoming her, she did have an acceptance letter from UVA). That evening they had an elaborate party celebrating his homecoming. He had done wrong, repented and by the grace of his father was forgiven: he was no longer lost. The older son, however, was furious. It did not seem fair that his brother was being rewarded for his mistakes, while he had done everything right and was not even getting recognition for it. I, too, was annoyed that I had spent all four of my high school years working hard and staying out of trouble; and Kate, who, like the younger son, had made a bad decision, yet was getting all the same rewards as I was.

In the parable, when the older son refused to join the party, his loving father went to him and extended grace to him as well, inviting him to join in on the fun. So what was this grace that the father showed to his two sons and why did they deserve it? This grace was an undeserved gift from a father to his two beloved sons. Much like the father showed grace to his sons, God shows us grace everyday. Because God loves everyone, He does not discriminate and shows grace to everyone, even if it is not deserved. Just as the younger son in the story was shown grace, Kate was shown grace when she got into UVA. Even though she had done something wrong and sinned she was still shown grace.

How, then, is that fair? Well on one level it doesn't even matter whether it is fair or not, as it did not actually affect me: I still got into UVA. Similarly, the younger son's homecoming celebration and the love that his father had for him did not affect the older son: the father still loved him just as much. Why then, does it matter? Well, you might argue that it was unfair because both she and the younger son did something wrong; and, therefore, didn't deserve that same grace. There is, however, a fatal flaw to this argument. If they didn't deserve grace because they had sinned, then neither does anyone else on this earth because everyone, even people who do the "right" thing, sin.

Even so, some things seem worse than others, so how is that argument fair? The truth is, though, that a sin is a sin no matter how bad, or not so bad, it may seem. God does not rank sins, and it is only fair to forgive one sinner if He forgives another. If God did not show grace to people who sinned, then we would all be damned. Instead, however, God loves everyone. He does not favor people based on what they do or don't do and forgives sinners. This is grace.

In my experience God did not love me more than Kate because of what she did and He demonstrated His undying love for both of us in His gift of grace. Like Kate, I have sinned as well and if God did not show grace to all sinners, then I would be without hope. In the parable, the father, who loved both sons dearly, was able to show them

both grace and did not love the older one more because he had “done the right thing.” Because no one is perfect, the older son would have sinned at some point and been shown the same grace as the younger brother. Since we are all sinners, none of us technically deserve God’s grace anyway. Still, we receive it everyday from God, who loves us and shows His grace and mercy to the world.

Before Jesus tells the parable, the scribes and Pharisees question why He is eating with outcasts and sinners. Like the older son, they, too, are lost because they fail to understand that they are also sinners and that in God’s eyes they are no better than the outcasts. God does not choose favorites and loves everybody equally. He loves the scribes and the Pharisees just as much as He loves the outcasts and is happy to show both groups of people grace. This is really hard for the scribes and the Pharisees to understand: why would Jesus, the son of God be just as inclined to sit with sinners as He would with the people who go to church and truly believe? They feel as though the outcast’s grace is undeserved when in actuality, theirs is too. This would be much like if a person who goes to church every week believed that God looked more favorably upon them than someone who just came once a year. In reality this is not the truth.

God loves everyone; and therefore, will accept and show grace to anyone and everyone who believes, regardless of how often they come to church. He will welcome all sinners with grace and mercy. Just as the father loved both his sons and showed each of them grace, God loves everyone and shows grace to people who come to church once a year and people who are regular attendees. What’s more, is that this grace is not just a general grace for everyone, but a personal gift from God. God doesn’t just love a church or a congregation, but loves everyone individually. The father in the story loved each son very much and showed each of them grace. Similarly, God loves and cares about each and every one of us. We individually receive grace from God and have the opportunity to form a very personal relationship with Him.

So what’s the conclusion of all of this? We should stop thinking about what is fair and what is not, and appreciate the grace that God has shown each of us as sinners. We need to understand that we are all sinners and that we should accept and cherish the individual grace God has shown each of us. I know that personally I feel relieved that God would show me the same grace as He shows other sinners and awed and amazed that God has enough love for everyone no matter what they do. Now that I know that God loves me as an individual it is easier to have a personal relationship with Him. Knowing that He cares about me, not just about people in general or the congregation, and that He will give me grace is extremely comforting and makes my jealousy of other people seem insignificant and irrelevant. It is almost humbling knowing how much God cares about me as an individual. Knowing all of this, I, too, will try to be more like Christ and welcome everyone into my heart with grace and mercy. Just as God has shown grace to us, we should all show grace to others.

**Christina Lambert:**

The parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son are some of the most indicative of God's love for each and every being. I'm sure everyone has been a part of a group, and as just a member. But to God they are more than a member. The entire world has 4.5 billion people, and each person makes a difference, and God knows and loves them all inside and out.

At my high school, people usually hang out with their own group of friends. Usually these groups are based on people who share the same interests, so each person kind of loses their individuality to blend in with the group. Sometimes group status is taken very far; so far, that someone who is not the same as the group is not included because their difference is seen as negative.

An example of this was seen at my lunch table at school. When I sat down with all of my friends, I noticed a girl sitting at our table that normally wasn't there. She continued to sit with us, which irritated my friends because she never joined in our conversations and only talked to one person. One of my friends even said that she needed to find her own friends. I felt that this was wrong and talked to another friend about it. We both agreed that the girl was annoying, but that we needed to reach out to her. Showing love and kindness to everyone like Jesus did, or as was done to the prodigal son or that one little sheep, was what that girl needed. Sure, she did different things than me and my friends; but she, in a sense, was *lost* because she didn't have any of her own friends to sit with.

Instead of seeing a person based on what group they belong to, God sees us as unique individuals that He handcrafted Himself. We may interact with others based on their group status, but God wants us to spend some time getting to know people because each person is just as valuable as the next one, just like the 100<sup>th</sup> sheep was just as special as all of the other sheep. In church, we are all regarded as Christians, so we are the same in God's eyes in that sense, but God looks deeper than that. Would any of us do that? Personally, I would not want to find just one lost sheep or gold coin, but getting to know the new girl at my lunch table is a start. After talking with my friends about the situation, we interacted with her more at lunch rather than just seeing her as a stranger. And that's what God wants all of us to do because He did it with us.

**Amanda Markham:**

I am a sinner. Everyday, without fail, I hammer a nail into the hand of Jesus Christ. Everyday, I do things that break the heart of my Creator. I'm a disgrace to God. I don't deserve His love, yet He loves me unconditionally. The fact is, Jesus Christ saved me. God allowed His beloved son to be tortured and killed so that I will have received forgiveness for my sins.

After all the sacrifices that God has made for me, I still treat the idea of Him the same way. I do the same things everyday—things that I know are wrong. I treat God as if he

were one of my parents. I know my parents love me regardless of what I do because they're stuck with me. I won their hearts as soon as I let out my first sounds the day I was born. They tolerated me through the terrible twos, the fearsome fours, and are still dealing with my self-involved teenage angst. Regardless of what terrible things I do, my parents stand by me. They love me unconditionally, as does God. Which is why, I think, it is so easy to take advantage of that love. According to Corinthians, "Love keeps no record of wrongs." Perhaps God's love for me is a love that I can't possibly understand.

On the ski trip this year, Jen conducted an amazing series of powerful contemporary exercises designed for the spiritual discovery of our individual relationships with God. One of the exercises was to look into a mirror and describe in one word, what God would see in us. Other people wrote positive things, like beauty and intelligence. I wrote sinful. Looking back, I think that I was wrong. At the time, I felt out of place. It is comparable to the story of the lost sheep. There were 99 sheep in the room with me, and yet I was alone wandering in the forest, or some other equally scary place. The truth is that I don't want to be the lone sheep. I don't want to keep inconveniencing the shepherd; I want to belong to the 99. I think that the pressure I put on myself to belong further separates me from my individual relationship with God.

I teach the Confirmation Class at Bush Hill Presbyterian Church. As a part of that class, we studied a lesson on the prodigal son. We teach that sin is indicated, in the gospel, as a positive experience. How could it possibly be a good thing? Because there is a cure! I believe that sin is a condition of the heart which is derived from the outlook that we, as human beings, are powerful enough to live our lives independently of God. Sin is simply a physical manifestation of our desire to exercise free will—our desire to fight against the things which God has designated. I am so desperate to deny that there is a higher power controlling every aspect of my life, that I hurt myself, those around me, and God.

The realization of the fact that sin is inevitable and the formulation of the intense desire to change one's evil ways is the primary step to recognizing the truth of God. The lost son, the youngest, the sinner, came home to his forgiving father and admitted that he was wrong. At the celebration feast of his brother's homecoming, the eldest—the hard-working, honest son—retreated to the garden to sulk. Which son was truly lost? It seems as though the eldest son needed a reality check as to the extent of God's love for humanity. God loves us all, including the sinners.

I'm not perfect. I don't do all the right things. I'm not even a particularly interesting individual. I am a sinner, but God sees me as more. God believes I have potential. I was wrong to say that God regards me as sinful, for He can see so much more than I do when I look in the mirror. God loves me entirely, but I don't love Him enough. Such a love as the one God has for us is complex; all we can do is love back. Love entirely, love patiently, love kindly, and most of all exhibit that love to the world. I'm still working on grasping the concept of that kind of love, and when I do, if I ever do, I hope that I use it the way God intended.

## **Laura Murray:**

Last year, my friend Rachel and I each diagnosed ourselves with “Little Sister Syndrome.” It’s a condition caused by the presence of one or more talented, poised, and successful older sisters. Symptoms include pressure to succeed, fear of inadequacy, and even jealousy. I am the younger of two sisters; Rachel is the youngest of five.

I’m sure that if I asked around, I could find that a “Little Brother Syndrome” exists as well. When I consider the prodigal son, I have to believe that he had a pretty severe case. While his older brother was dutifully following their father’s orders and assisting him in the fields, “Mr. Prodigal” was out partying it up. I can’t help but consider that, in demanding his share of the property, the younger son was hoping to prove himself. Maybe he had plans of creating his own success outside of the large shadow cast by his elder brother. Maybe he dreamed of returning in a few years as a man his father could be proud of.

Unfortunately, the prodigal son didn’t return a rich, successful, noble man at all. He was forced to return as a stranger pleading for a job. As a girl affected by Little Sister Syndrome, I have a little idea of the shame he felt. For example, my sister Karen has been driving for six years, and has never had an accident. Meanwhile, I managed both to run my car into a tree and to hit a parked car within the first six months of having a license. It’s far enough ago now that I can laugh at the situation, but the insurance people and my parents didn’t find it very funny at all.

However, the father’s utter forgiveness of his second son, in the parable, despite all the mistakes the son made and the grief he caused, is remarkable. He goes far and above meeting his son’s requests by reinstating him as an honored member of the family, even honoring him with a feast. When I consider that God loves me in this way, so unconditionally, that annoying little voice in the back of my head telling me I’ll never measure up gets a little quieter. After all, what is earthly embarrassment compared to the vast love that God has for me?

This morning, I’m re-visiting colleges and facing a decision I’ve been avoiding for quite a while—where I’ll go to school in the fall. It’s a dilemma that has haunted me since I began my college search in January 2007, and with the decision deadline getting closer every week, my tendency to stress frequently gets the better of me. However, the story of the prodigal son reminds me that no matter what I decide or where I choose, God will be with me. I cannot go far enough away, literally *or* metaphorically, that God won’t be there to hold my hand and welcome me back into his family. This assurance gives me more patience—a quality I generally lack—and allows me to open my eyes to the wonderful spiritual home I already have at Bush Hill, like the prodigal son as he returns to his father’s house. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” but I know that God will love me whether or not I have more car accidents than my big sister.

## Chris Wolberg:

### Your Personal Relationship with God

How good of friends are you with God? Are you intimate friends? Casual Acquaintances? Or do you talk to him about as much as you talk to your waiter at Outback?

Do you pray to him every week? Every day? Or just when things go wrong?

When I was a child, my personal relationship with God was not very developed. I didn't pray to him about my day or the life I was living. No ... about the only time I prayed to God was when I lost the T.V. remote. I feel that our relationship now is much better. I pray all of the time. I pray to him about my day, about school, about my relationships with others, but occasionally I still pray for the T.V. remote.

While writing this sermon, I asked my mother how she knew that God exists. I know that God exists by the feeling that I get when I pray and his existence is even clearer when those prayers are answered. But how could I say that to an entire congregation? She handed me this book: *When God Winks At You, How God Speaks Directly to You Through the Power of Coincidence* by Squire Rushnell. I believe the inside cover says it all: *read inside*. After reading a little I found a chapter on how God is always listening. Rushnell talks about the physical change in people when they pray. Coincidence, or God wink? People always say, "Wow, that was a coincidence." But should they say instead, "Wow, that was a God wink?"

I believe that all coincidences are God telling us that he is present, that he cares, and that he wants us to succeed. I could go on for hours about all of the God winks that I have experienced. However, instead of boring you with my life story, I decided to pick out one of the most recent ones. It happened last Sunday while I was writing this sermon. I took a break from typing to text Casey because I noticed that I did not know how to get to Jen Reiff's house for youth group that night. Before I could even hit the send button, God winked at me. I got a text message from her saying, "Would you like Madeline to give you a ride to youth group tonight?" I almost dropped the phone. The power of God is truly amazing.

Some of you may be asking *how do I develop my relationship with God?* The answer is simple: talk to him. God is always willing to listen. Tell him about your day. Talk to him about tomorrow. Ask him for the patience to endure the seemingly never-ending questions of your co-workers. He is ready to have a personal relationship with each and every one of us. You have the power to talk to that which is all powerful. He will listen and he will guide. He will always be with you.

Let us pray: *Lord thank you for wanting to have a personal relationship with each of us. Thank you for listening to us and guiding us in the right direction. We know that we have not been completely faithful to you, Lord, but we know also that you still love us. Stay with us and help us to do everything in your name. Amen.*