

Old School Can Still be Cool
"1976 – Carry On, Wayward Son"

(Biblical Text: Luke 15:11-32)

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When "*Carry on, Wayward Son*" by the band Kansas hit the top of the charts in 1976. I loved everything about it. *(Scott, can we hear a little bit of it?)*

That's enough. Well, more than enough for some of you and not near enough for ex-rockers like me. Old School. **What's not to love?** It had a hard-driving drum and bass line, soaring electric guitar licks, great vocals. And I had heard them play before they hit the big time, once in *Manhattan*, and once, though I hate to admit it now, at the *Red Dog Inn* in Lawrence.

Besides, the song also had these cool lyrics from the *Myth of Icarus*, who flew too high, and *John Brown* of Kansas History, who went too far. And they sort of sounded spiritual, like their other big hit, "*Dust in the Wind.*"

Kerry Livgren says that when he wrote the song he didn't intend "*Carry On, Wayward Son*" to be religious at all. But the words turned out to be prophetic. He became a Christian in 1980, and now he says, he was the "*Wayward Son,*" lost in the noise and confusion, that heaven waited for.

And it's hard not to see the Biblical parallels in our text from Luke 15, where Jesus tells a parable about a family with a Father, and two children, one older and one younger - very, very different from one another.

It's a universal story. There are movies with scripts that could be taken right off the pages of this old Biblical story of a prodigal child, across all genres: "*In Her Shoes,*" "*The Matrix,*" "*Finding Nemo*" - to name just a few.

It's story about our human *drama*, or as my Okie friend Rev. Todd Guin says it - "*dram-mah.*" *(Say it with me...)* Well, he ought to know, since he worked with youth for twenty-five years before leading his own Church. I'm just saying, youth-drama. But the truth is, none of us here are entirely immune from our own version of the human drama – *Oh, the humanity of it all!*

First-borns have resentments about spoiled younger siblings. And last-borns have unresolved feelings about being #2 or #3 behind "*the golden child.*" And parental hopes for the future careers and happiness of our children don't always work out. Again - *Oh, the humanity of it all!*

If you'd like to follow the text with me, open your Bible to Luke 15:11-32.

The first part of the story is the most familiar, the age-old story of a *wayward son* who has *carried on* and failed, and crashed and burned. Some of us have been there. But the text turns at verse eighteen.

The prodigal comes to his senses, and says, *"I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"*¹

Verse twenty says, *"...while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."*² That's the Good News. This is not a story about sons and daughters at all. It's a story about the nature of God.

Who does the looking for the one who was lost! Who does the running? The father. Who does the embracing? Who lavishes love? Who throws the party? The father. The father. Always, the father. Such love!

That's all well and good, but I always get stuck on the elder brother. I guess that's because I am one. The Church is pretty good at proclaiming amazing grace to prodigals, who surely need it. *"It's OK,"* we keep saying, *"God knows what you have done, but you are forgiven!"*

But what does the Gospel say to elder brothers and sisters like me and many of you, who spend our lives playing by the rules and have managed to overcome the "big ticket" public sins which require repentance?

Fred Craddock translates our responses into the vernacular of the rural South: *"He did what? He threw a party for the rascal? I can understand letting him back in, but after what he did he ought to come through the back door and eat in the kitchen for a while. That boy needs to learn him a lesson or two."*³

And that's how it happened. Look at verse 28-29. The Bible says that the older brother became angry and refused to go in. He never joined the party. Instead he says to his father, *"...all these years I have ... never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends."*⁴

¹ Luke 15:18-19. *New Revised Standard Version*. Copyright © 1989, used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Ibid. Luke 15:20. *New Revised Standard Version*.

³ "Party Time," *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, p. 173

⁴ Op. Cit. Luke 15:28-29. *New Revised Standard Version*.

It sometimes happens that way. My younger brother got away with a lot more. and had it a lot easier than I did. And he got his estate gift early, and then some, and then some, and he lost it all. Hard to turn loose of that.

And it's not only older brothers and sisters who feel that way. We sing about and read about God's amazing grace that forgives prodigal sons and daughters, and we are glad about that, we really are. **But what about us? What about the good and faithful servants, sons and daughters?**

What is the Good News for us? The text tells us. Look at how verse thirty-one begins. *"Then the father said to him..."*⁵ Where did the father have to be to say anything at all to the older son? Outside the party. With him.

And he says, *"You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."*⁶ That's the Good News. God says, *"I am with you. I love you. All that I have is yours!"*

And when you get that, when I get that, **finally**, we understand that aspiring to be a good and faithful person, aspiring to be good and kind and generous and honest, is *not in order to persuade God to love you.*

It is precisely because God **is** love and **already** loves you and promised to be with you every day of your life and beyond. And all you can do is try to reflect that love in your life and thank God your whole life long.

So ultimately, this parable isn't just about wayward sons and older brothers. It's fundamentally about a God so crazy in love with humanity, with them, with us, that this God will go to any length to connect with us.

Finally, Did you notice the very, very end of this parable? Down at verse thirty-two and beyond. It really doesn't have one...

Jesus leaves unspoken questions hanging in the air. Will the older son go in to the party, or not? Will the Pharisees and scribes reach out to accept those they consider "different?" Will we?

But Jesus didn't really finish the story. He's left that to each of us. Amen.

⁵ Ibid. Luke 15:31. *New Revised Standard Version.*

⁶ Ibid. Luke 15:31. *New Revised Standard Version.*