

“Breaking Free”  
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia  
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Luke 15:11 – 32

<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup> When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup> He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” <sup>20</sup> So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup> He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup> Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup> Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Last week, in the first sermon in this series, we talked about gravity. Financial gravity. How the right amount of gravity is good and healthy, but too little gravity or too much gravity works against what God wants for us. This week, we’re talking about being breaking free. Breaking

free from the ties, the expectations, the unhealthy wants that keep us from being the disciples God envisions.

Because money, an unhealthy relationship with money and stuff, can be like a black hole. Pulling us in and not making it easy to break free.

I'm talking openly about money and our relationship with money and stuff for two reasons.

1) In term of our spiritual lives, there are few things I've seen have as large an impact as generosity on a person's life.

In 21 years of ministry, when someone has taken a giant spiritual leap, is happier, more faithful, and a more committed disciple, there are any number of reasons for it, but the one I hear MOST often is that they have a new understanding of what it means to live generously. They have, more often than not, Broken Free from The Culture of More. No matter where you give, it is important that you do. It changes you. I have yet to meet a person who embarked upon this journey who regretted it.

2) We have room to grow, and most of us don't grow until we are challenged.

As I've shared with you before, I was in seminary before I ever filled out a pledge card as a member of the church. And even then, I thought I didn't need to.

I was in my first church before I was challenged to tithe, to give 10% of everything I received. And it took me years to get there.

As a church we've got room to grow, too.

If we take the annual median income for Lewisburg (which I suspect we can agree is low for this congregation). If we take the average median income and take 10% of that, the annual budget of Old Stone Presbyterian Church would **triple**. If each of our 150 families gave 5% of their income to Old Stone, leaving 5% for other charities and causes dear to their heart, still, our budget would almost **double**.

- Which would mean that no child would be turned away from pre-school, whether or not they could pay.
- Each youth who wanted to go on a mission trip could do just that- whether or not the fundraising lunches were successful.
- The Lewisburg/Fairlea Food Locker could hire help, be open more often, and have fresh fruit and vegetables for those who are hungry.
- Logos is our Wednesday afterschool program for elementary school children. What if we could expand it, to every afternoon, for every child, and include help with homework. Healthy snacks. A chance to play. And parents could have the option to pick up a nutritious dinner when they came to pick up their children.

If Old Stone Presbyterian Church were to become a tithing congregation (and we have a great start, because many of you are already tithers), **all** of these things would become possible. All of them.

Tom Berlin, in chapter 2 of his book if you are reading along, presents some startling statistics, 44.8 percent of Americans reported that they gave \$0 of their income to any charitable purpose. None.

Another 41.3 percent gave less than 2 percent of their income away. This means that the vast majority of financial generosity in the U.S. is offered by about 15 percent of the population that is willing to give away more than 2 percent of their income.<sup>1</sup>

Most of us need to be challenged in order to change. Consider this your challenge. Each and every one of you, to break free from the culture of more, and the best way I know how to do that is the way God tells us to do that, and that is to simplify and give.

The good news is that you are here. Here at church. Here for worship. I KNOW that you are hungry for a different way, for more faith and understanding. For greater peace and less despair.

And one of the ways that we do that is to cease being recipients and move to being participants.

On *The Big Bang Theory*<sup>2</sup> this past week Amy and Sheldon were opening their wedding presents and writing thank you notes. They received one gift that they couldn't figure out what it was. Their questions trying to figure out what they had been given led to a scavenger hunt, which led to a realization about the nature of their relationship, and their strengths. It was so much better than **just** a gift. They had moved from being recipients to becoming participants.

God wants this kind of transition for us, too.

Tom Berlin writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Berlin, Tom. *Defying Gravity: Break Free from the Culture of More*. Abingdon Press, 2016. Pages 52-55.  
Smith, Christian and Davidson, Hilary. *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> *The Big Bang Theory* "The Wedding Gift Wormhole" Season 12 Episode 2. September 27, 2018. Sheldon and Amy drive themselves crazy trying to figure out what 'perfect gift' Leonard and Penny gave them for their wedding.



There is a moment of epiphany for Christ-followers when we recognize the difference between being a beneficiary of God’s kingdom and being a participant in God’s kingdom. When you find yourself submitting your kingdom of self to the kingdom of God, good things begin to happen.

This orientation toward God’s kingdom is life-altering. It creates an identity founded in generosity.

We become *stewards*. A steward is a person who manages another’s property. Stewards have broad discretionary powers over how an account is managed or how a household is run, but they know that primarily they are servants, looking not to their self-interest but to the welfare of the owner. Christ-followers understand they are stewards of a gift given to them by God—a life with unique strengths, talents, abilities, and resources to use in ways guided by God’s own Spirit that lives within them, so as to honor and glorify the giver of the gift.<sup>3</sup>

Most people in the United States live like owners. If I am an owner, all that I have is mine. In their book *The Paradox of Generosity*, Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson review the data and find that “very large numbers of Americans, despite wanting to enjoy happy, healthy, purposeful lives, fail to practice the kinds of generosity that actually tend to lead to happiness, health, and purpose in life. Something gets in their way.”

I included an article by the authors of the study Berlin cites in the first stewardship packet I prepared here at Old Stone Presbyterian Church, that sums up their research in this way “Giving Money Away Makes us Happy, so Why Do So Few of Us Do It?”<sup>4</sup>

Isn’t happiness what we want?  
And isn’t it what we want to teach our children?

Our text for today is the parable of the Prodigal Son. As Tom Berlin points out in his book, the son asking for his inheritance early would have been offensive, disrespectful, and downright cruel.<sup>5</sup>

But the father gives it to him.

Because the son is trapped by financial gravity, and the father is not. The son is an owner, and the father sees himself as a steward.

The son realizes, before too long, what a poor bargain he has made. The very thing he thought would solve all of his problems has revealed just how shallow his theology truly was. In a world where he had been offered nutritious meals, he had built his diet on nothing but sugar and preservatives.

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<sup>3</sup> Berlin, 39-40.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.vox.com/2014/11/3/6078101/giving-money-away-makes-us-happy>

<sup>5</sup> Berlin, 31-32.

He then goes home, to repent, to ask for forgiveness, to stop being hungry. And the father who has every right to be angry. Every right to practice a little tough love, runs to meet him. Runs to meet him. A horrible, shameful act for a grown man in Jesus' time.

The father doesn't care what the neighbors think. He cares how he treats people. He cares how he takes care of what, who, has been entrusted to him.

Then, the older son, the so-called faithful son comes to complain, because he feels cheated. He feels as though he has earned the other half of his inheritance, and now it is in danger.

Most times when we hear this story we relate to the son, the one who strays and then returns. Or we relate to the older brother, the one who has tried so hard to do right.

This time, when I heard these words, I couldn't help but wonder about who, among these three, is the one who is happy? Isn't it the father? The one who can let go and then welcome? The one who is living the life of a steward? The one who not just believes in generosity but practices it, too? That's who we're called to emulate.

Although, if truthful, I'm much more like the prodigal son than I care to admit. I daydream, from time to time, about what it would be like if I won the lottery. And I've even bought a ticket from time to time, too.

I do that despite knowing that winning the lottery increases the likelihood that I will declare bankruptcy.

Increases the likelihood that I will experience despair and depression.

And, studies tell us, will not make me any more or less happy than I currently am.

It took Jack Whittaker just four years to go bust.<sup>6</sup>

A native of Teays Valley, Whittaker won more than \$300 million dollars. And far from being a windfall, it ruined not only his own life but the rest of his family's, too, exposing every crack and weakness that was no doubt already there. He later reflected he wished he'd torn up the ticket. Those lotteries winnings owned him. He couldn't break free from that gravity, and find the life God wanted for him.

So why do I dream about it? Why do I think, like the prodigal thought, that a windfall is going to solve my problems?

Because I still tend to think like an owner rather than a steward, looking at the green of the grass that is over there, rather than learning to bloom where I am planted.

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<sup>6</sup><http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/11/28/500-million-powerball-jackpot-the-tragic-stories-of-the-lotterys-unluckiest-winners/slide/andrew-jack-whittaker/>  
<https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/25/heres-why-lottery-winners-go-broke.html>

In 2007, The New York Times wrote a story about millionaires who don't feel rich:<sup>7</sup>

Everyone around here looks at the people above them," said Gary Kremen, the 43-year-old founder of Match.com, a popular online dating service. "It's just like Wall Street, where there are all these financial guys worth \$7 million wondering what's so special about them when there are all these guys worth in the hundreds of millions of dollars."

Mr. Kremen estimated his net worth at \$10 million. That puts him firmly in the top half of 1 percent among Americans, according to wealth data from the Federal Reserve, but barely in the top echelons in affluent towns like Palo Alto, Menlo Park and Atherton. So he logs 60- to 80-hour workweeks because, he said, he does not think he has nearly enough money to ease up.

"You're nobody here at \$10 million," Mr. Kremen said earnestly over a glass of pinot noir at an upscale wine bar here.

Or would you rather be like the church in Texas<sup>8</sup> that, this past April, decided to celebrate the holiday by taking \$100,000 out of their budget to pay off the medical debts of people in their community. Starting with veterans in a 20 mile range around their church, they then moved on to families with medical debts, and as they offered generosity others decided to chip in. What started as a \$100,000 project ended up eliminating \$10,551,618 in debt and affecting 4,229 families.

Which would you rather be? The prodigal son or the generous father?

Jesus shows us the way, and it starts by breaking free.

Thanks be to God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/05/technology/05rich.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://relevantmagazine.com/life5/texas-church-abolishes-10-million-medical-debt-local-families/>  
<https://www.dallasnews.com/life/uplifting-news/2018/04/02/carrollton-church-erases-medical-debt-4000-area-families>

## Call to Prayer, September 30, 2018

As we move into our time of prayer I want to bring up something that I didn't feel had a home in the sermon, but feel it needs to be said.<sup>9</sup>

This has been a hard week. A hard week in American politics and the news, that has left people feeling angry, vulnerable, and more emotions than can sufficiently be listed in the time I have before me.

On Thursday, The National Sexual Assault Hotline<sup>10</sup> saw a 147% percent increase in calls when compared to normal weekday patterns. From Thursday to Sunday there was a 338% increase, and Friday was the busiest day in their history, according to RAINN, a large anti-sexual violence organization that administers the hotline.

I have no doubt that some of the people with these stories to tell are right here, in this sanctuary. Some of these stories have been told and some of those stories might never being told. But they belong to Children of God, going about their lives when something in the news or a fellow survivor sharing their story brings it all back. I have an older colleague in ministry who is a survivor of sexual abuse who says that it is likely that many men and women who are survivors have never “heard the pulpit speak to them about what happened to them. They never heard a sermon that even used the words sexual assault. The topic was ignored out of consideration of what was called ‘good taste.’ ‘Some things we simply don't talk about at church,’ they learned. ‘It would not be appropriate. Members would be offended. What about the children present?’ Add to all of that today's highly partisan culture that has now surrounded this issue and is trying to swallow it up and capture it for political purposes and, well, that is why it is not preached.”

And yet, to quote words from my friend, the Rev. Shannon Kershner “And yet, only God knows why, despite all of that—despite all of the silence internal and external, these women and men continue to be drawn to the Sunday gathering of worship. They continue to come into sanctuaries like this one seeking and often finding a sense of belonging even while they still carry the fear of being found out. Perhaps they come always longing for a word from the Lord—a word of healing, of presence, of hope.

A Gospel word that promises that no matter where they have been, no matter what has happened to them, no matter how heavy the cloak of shame and silence has weighed them down, the truth of their baptism proclaims they have never been unknown to God. Even in those moments of seeming absence, they have never been outside of God's care and presence. They come seeking that Gospel truth and sometimes they are even able to let it sink in and light up the darkness from time to time. “

**Sexual abuse, sexual assault is not okay. And if it happened to you, it was not your fault. It is not of God, who created you wonderfully and fearfully.**

God, who knows brokenness, is here to remind you that you are not alone and never abandoned.

We, we who are the church, say that we will do EVERYTHING in our power to ensure this will be a safe space so that this may be a place where you are soaked in the light of the gospel.

Let us prepare for a time of prayer.

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<sup>9</sup> Much of this has relied on an advance copy of the sermon preached by the Rev. Shannon J. Kershner at 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Illinois on September 30, 2018. I have used it with her permission.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.rainn.org/news/rainn-hotline-helps-record-number-survivors>