

## **Freeway Sermon 1 – “A weird dad”**

**April 10, 2016**

If you were here last week you might remember the metaphor of the sofa. We said that a lot of sofas are a lot like a lot of us. They look pretty good from the outside, but if you start looking underneath the cushions, or at what has collected underneath ... not so pretty. I'm missing a remote at my house right now. I know it's in the sofa somewhere. In mine there'd also be some popcorn. Where the kids sit there'd be chips. Randy says his sofa has one of those Velcro flaps in back, and his dog has figured out how to tear open the Velcro so he can munch on the leftovers that collect there. What would they find in your sofa? An extra sock? Some food wrappers? A used Kleenex? A couple dollars worth of change? Be honest! You don't have to raise a hand or anything, but be honest: does your sofa have some junk inside?

Well here's the deal: most of us kind of look like a sofa. We look okay on the outside, but there is a whole lot hidden underneath. There's a whole lot inside that we really don't want anyone else to see – it's embarrassing. A few months ago we talked about masks. Most all of us wear masks. We want people to see a smiling face, a face that conveys success, and happiness, and strength. But underneath we don't feel so successful, or so happy, or so strong. In fact we struggle with a sense of fear, and a sense of failure, and a sense that we might actually be a fraud. The sins of our past, and the struggles of our present, and our fears for the future just kind of drag life down ... sometimes.

Is this too pessimistic a picture? Listen guys, I want to show you verse that a lot of us Jesus followers just don't get. We say we believe it here (head), but we don't live like we believe it. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10.10) Now, who's the “they”? ... Yeah, he's talking about you and me. And do you suppose the life he's talking about is this life on earth, or the eternal life he offers us after we die? ... I believe the correct answer is ... “both.” The NLT translates it like this: “My purpose (Jesus says) is to give them (to give you) a rich and satisfying life.” Well ... are you feeling it? Is that the kind of life you're living? The CEV translates Jesus like this. He says, “I came so that everyone (every one of us) might have life – and have in in its fullest.”

Listen guys, Jesus did not set you free by dying on a cross and rising from the dead so that you could go on living your life as a slave. He died to set you free from your past, to give you the strength and the joy to deal with your issues in the present, and to give you a hope, an anticipation for the future. He came to show us the “Free-way.” Do you believe that?

Well, are you living it? And ... is our struggle to find strength, and peace, and joy – even in the middle of all our junk – is our struggle on him or is that on us? Do you believe God wants more for you than you are finding? It seems to me most Christians could be cast in the Direct TV commercials — they are Settlers. Well, God has a lot more for you than cable; but you’ve got to want it for yourself. Do you believe God will help you experience a better life than you are experiencing now? I’m telling you, it is Satan’s will that you see life here on earth as something to be endured. It is God’s will that you discover a rich and satisfying life here on earth, and even more so in heaven. So who is winning in your life: Satan, or God? Well, our goal for this series is to help us position ourselves where God’s will for us wins. He does his part; but there are some things we need to do to take advantage of the life he offers.

Now, some of you guys are going to push back on this next part. But listen: God didn’t design us to do life in rows, he designed us to do life in circles. We were not made to do life in isolation. He didn’t create the church just to be a place where we sit in rows on Sunday mornings looking at the back of someone’s head. Doing life with God takes more effort than one hour a week. For you to discover and to understand and to experience the life God designed you to live requires that we seriously connect with others who are trying to walk the same path we are.

Todd Layne, our discipleship minister, is challenging all our life groups to work through this Freeway series with us. If you want to get connected with a life group, you need to talk to Todd, or me, or Jon. We are also going to have a Sunday morning group working through this Freeway series with us. They’ll be meeting next week at 11:00 up in the loft. If you need directions, any of our greeters can get you there. We’re also going to start a class on Wednesday evenings beginning a week from Wednesday. I know these groups will seem kind of weird to some of you, and some of the people around you will probably be kind of weird. But you

will get a chance to dig into this stuff together a lot deeper than we can go in a sermon. And the deeper you dig, the richer and more freeing it can be for you. Guys, give it a shot!

Okay, next week we're going to start exploring the path ... the "Free-way." This week we're going to talk about God. We're going to talk about what kind of God he is, and why you can trust him when he nudges you on to this path. If you can get a sense God of what God is really like, it will be a whole lot easier to understand and accept the path to freedom we'll start unpacking next week.

And we're going to start by retelling a very familiar story. You see, some stories just deserve retelling. Does your family ever get together, maybe a family reunion, and they start telling the stories? Maybe you've heard them 100 times, but you watch the kids, and their eyes are dancing. In my family we retell the story about my sister Debbie getting kicked in the head by a horse; or when I was caught sleepwalking about the age of 4, refrigerator door wide open, getting ready to relieve myself; or when my brother Johnny hit me in the head with a baseball bat (which probably explains a lot, doesn't it?). In Randy's family it's the story of his brother trying to teach their horse to climb stairs; but to get to the stairs he had to take the horse through the kitchen. Have you ever had a horse stuck in your kitchen?

You have your family stories. They bring a smile to your face, a tear to your eye. And they explain a lot about who we are, and why we are the way we are. Well it's the same in this family of God. We have our stories – and some of them deserve to be told, and retold, and retold, because they bring a smile to our face, and a tear to our eye, and they explain a whole lot about who we are, and why we are the way we are.

And this is one of our best family stories. Jesus tells a story about an extraordinarily weird Dad: his Dad ... our Dad. He tells the story in the form of a parable. We call it the parable of the prodigal son; it's really a story about an extraordinarily weird Dad ... thank God. You can find the story in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15; but we're going to have key verses on screen as well.

Now, you need to know that Jesus is surrounded by two very different kinds of people. (Luke 15.1-2) There were these religious leaders: the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. And these were serious guys: they were serious about religion, they were serious about God ... But they were hard-nosed. They were strong on truth (they thought), and seriously weak on grace. And then there were the misfits, the marginal, the not so religious. Luke calls them the tax collectors and the sinners ... the kind of people the Pharisees and the teachers of the law despised.

Well, Jesus tells them a story about a dad with two sons. And if you think about it, one of his sons was kind of like the Pharisees and the scribes, and the other son was kind of like the tax collectors and sinners. Think about it: Doesn't it amaze you how two kids from the same family can be so different? Anyway, kid 2 – the wild one – comes up to dad and he asks dad a question that should never have been asked. He says, "Dad, will you give me my portion of the estate now, right now?"

Now, it's important that you don't read this story with 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes. You see, there are some things a 1<sup>st</sup> century dad would never do. A 1<sup>st</sup> century middle-eastern dad would never divide his estate up early and give it to one of his sons. That just didn't happen. When a dad was dying, that's when he'd divvy his stuff up: you get the grill, you get the power tools, you get the golf clubs, you get the truck – stuff like that. That's just how it was done, at death.

But in this weird story a terrible kid approaches his dad and asks him a question that should never have been asked: "Will you give me my part now, right now?" That was equivalent, in their eyes, to a son telling his dad, "I wish you were dead; I wish you'd just die. Give me my stuff so I can go live the life I want to live."

And what is even weirder than the son's request, is the dad's response. You see, there are things a 1<sup>st</sup> century middle-eastern dad would never do. But this dad does. He divides up his property, and gives this jerk kid his stuff. You see, Jesus is trying to tell us, "We don't have an ordinary dad."

So the boy grabs the money, jumps on his camel, cranks up his headphones with "Born to Be Wild," and heads out for Vegas – or whatever their equivalent was. Jesus just calls it "a far country." And the

kid's life is just one big party: he's having fun, he's doing all the things he couldn't do at home, he's living large ... doing life "his way."

And as you might predict, it wasn't long before his way didn't work out so well. This kid crashed hard. I don't know whether he spent his money on the ladies; maybe he sniffed a bunch of it up his nose, or shot it into his arm; or maybe it was the slots, or the booze ... whatever. Before long this kosher Jewish kid was broke, he was hungry, and he ended up degraded – a Jewish boy working on a farm feeding pigs, so hungry he was tempted to eat the pig slop. Have you ever been that hungry?

But it is at this point that Jesus' story begins to turn. Because ... because God does some of his greatest miracles in our lives when we're in the pigpen. Do you buy that? You may kind of feel like you are in a pigpen right now. Well you need to know: If you will let him, God does some of his greatest miracles when we discover, when we admit we're in the pigpen.

It's a great line. Jesus says, "When he came to his senses ..." That's huge, guys. We're going to talk about this one more next week. But here's the deal: Until we admit you are broken, until we admit that doing life your way isn't working out so well, we will never discover the "Free-way" our Dad wants for us. There is this moment of brokenness, this moment of ruthless humility when the kid realizes: "I'm broke, I'm a mess, I'm hungry, what am I doing?! Even the guys who work for my dad have a way better life than I have. Why did I do what I did? Why did I run away?" Ever been there, felt that?

Well this kid starts thinking, "What would I not give for a second chance? What would I not give for a do-over? I am so stupid! And then it hits him: "Maybe I can go back. There's no way Dad would take me back as his son, but maybe he would give me a job. Maybe I could sleep with the hired guys, and eat with the hired guys, and maybe I could start turning my life around." Now the kid knows it's a long-shot – remember, this is a 1<sup>st</sup> century story. The rules were different back then. But the kid was out of options, and he's desperate, so he heads home ... he heads back towards Dad.

What he still doesn't realize is how weird our Dad is. He doesn't realize that every single day he has been wasting his Dad's stuff, Dad's been watching for him, and waiting for him to come back home. So Dad sees kid way before kid sees Dad.

Now ... you dad's out there: Do you ever embarrass your kids. You ever embarrass your kids on purpose? It's kind of fun. When Andy or Alatheia used to bring a date to the house – and they were required to do that – I would love to torment them. It was fun: embarrassed the bejeegers out of my kids. Andy had a girl in the kitchen one time. I walked in, I stared at her for a while, and then I said, "You're right, Andy, it is different." Then I left. She grilled him for hours on what it was about her that was different. There was nothing; I just thought it was funny. My kids hate it when I am driving and I don't turn my blinker off. They think it makes me look like some oblivious old man. So sometimes I'll leave it on for miles, just to torment them. It's fun.

*("college savings with fairy dad-mother" plays in background)* How about this one, dads: Have you ever allowed yourself to be embarrassed because you love your kids? That's a great commercial out right now. Be honest dads: any of you ever put on a tutu, or let your daughter paint your nails? Any of you dads ever pass on the Mustang and buy a mini-van ... for the kids? Any of you dads ever intentionally humiliate yourself, embarrass yourself, because you loved your kids so much? Great dads do that sometimes.

Well ... God does too. Because when Dad sees his kid coming home, he does what no self-respecting 1<sup>st</sup> century dad would do. He runs. Now I know that doesn't sound weird to us. Some of you dads put on your running gear and you go out and run to stay in shape. Other of us dads put on our running gear so people will think we go out and run to stay in shape. But dads didn't do that back then. This Dad hikes up his robe and he starts running: sandals flopping, necklace jiggling, hair blowing in the wind.

Let me tell you how improper that was. You see, back then they wore these robes. If a man was going to run, he'd have to pull his robe up, exposing his legs. That was shameful, humiliating, to them. It's not that they had ugly legs; it just wasn't done. A priest wasn't even allowed to pick

up his robe to avoid pools of blood from the sacrifices. I love this one: If a bird got under your robe on a Sabbath, you couldn't lift your robe up to let it out – till the Sabbath was over. The bird was supposed to make itself at home, I guess. The prophet Isaiah, in the Old Testament, describes the humiliation of Israel like this. He says, "Lift up your skirts, bare your legs, and wade through the streams. Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered." (Isaiah 47.2-3)

You see, a man with dignity just wouldn't lift up his robes and run. But in broad daylight – this Dad tosses away his dignity and his self-respect ... because all that mattered was rescuing his son. You need to hang on to that piece. This is no ordinary dad. And you need to remember this; you need to get this: when you are ready to stop running away from him, when you turn around, you'll see God running to you. He is always pursuing us; we just can't always see it when we're running away.

And what this weird Dad does next is just as weird. I'm telling you guys, no 1<sup>st</sup> century middle eastern dad would throw a party for a kid who had just told him to drop dead and squandered away his inheritance. You see, in some cultures, there are some sins so big, so egregious, so repugnant, so contaminating that they have to be cut out. Because if they are not cut out, they will be like a cancer, destroying everything they touch. If you don't shame, if you don't humiliate, if you don't ostracize people who commit certain sins, others will be tempted to follow the same path and the community itself will be at risk ... they thought.

There was a word they used in Aramaic for cutting a person off – "kezazeh." It means, literally, "to cut off." And in some Near Eastern communities there was a ritual called "kezazeh," a cutting off. It was kind of like a funeral for someone who wasn't dead yet, physically. It was terrible, it was final: A total rejection of someone, the alienation of someone who violated their moral standards. They are telling you: you are nothing to us any more; you are not welcome here; you are banished; you are dead to us.

And if they saw you coming, they would form a "welcome" team. And this welcome team would intercept you on the road before you got into town. They might put some parched corn and some nuts into jars. And then they would surround you and they'd smash the jars into pieces. They would

announce that until every jar was perfectly reformed and every grain of corn and every nut was back in the exact jar it came from, you are cut off from your home. Your relationship with your family and your friends and your neighbors was irretrievably shattered.

Can you imagine the shame and the horror of that happening to you? You are humiliated. You are cut off from your family; cut off from your friends. You are not welcome any more, ever. How would that make you feel? So when Jesus spoke of the prodigal coming home, I suspect those who were listening would have leaned forward, anticipating what would come next, because they knew how the story was supposed to end...

Instead ... not only does this weird dad run to meet his son, he hugs him, he kisses him, he sends for the best robe in the house, and some Converse All Stars, and a ring for his finger. And he kills their best calf and cooks up some t-bones ... he throws this amazing party! Because, he says, "My son was lost, and now he's back. We're not going to smash jars and scatter corn-nuts; we're going to party!"

Wow! And when Jesus finished the story, I figure the tax collectors and the sinners were stunned, and maybe ... maybe they felt the faintest glimmer of hope. And the Pharisees and the teachers of the law – they were stunned too, but for very different reasons. And Jesus looks at them and he says ... and he looks at us and he says ... "God is no ordinary dad, guys. This is what God is like; this is what God is about. He wants you to heal you; he wants you to live an extraordinary life, a free-way, and if you'll stop running and turn around, you'll discover that he is pursuing you so passionately.

Now ... there are four truths, four applications that I'd like you to chew on. These are life changing. (1) God still loves you when you make poor choices. Have you ever made any poor choices? Ever made a mess for yourself or the people around you because of stupid choices you have made? A stupid financial choice, a stupid dating choice, a stupid career choice, a stupid recreational choice? Guys, there are no stupid choices you have ever made that have caused our incredible God to love you any less!

I suspect you will discover that you have a lot in common with the people in your study groups. Sometimes we think, “If people knew the real me; if people knew where I have been, what I have done; if people knew the kind of junk I am battling right now – they wouldn’t like me, they wouldn’t accept me.” One Free-way group at one church wanted to print up some t-shirts. All the t-shirt would say is, “Me too!” You have dysfunction in your past? Me too! You have dysfunction in your family? Me too! You battling some embarrassing sin? Me too! Maybe it is substance abuse, maybe it is lust, or porn, or greed, or overspending, or laziness, or anger, or whatever. Me too! We’ve all got our skeletons, we’ve all got dark closets we are terrified someone will discover. Guys, God still loves you when you make poor choices ... and we will too.

(2) God still loves you when you fail, even when you are in the middle of a pigpen. Guys, Jesus stands eyeball to eyeball with the notorious sinners of his day and they see something different in his eyes, something captivating. This man of God, this holy man, this perfect man, still loves us perfectly. You see, I don’t care what mess you are in now, what failure you are dealing with: a moral failure, a financial failure, a vocational failure, a marriage failure, a friendship failure, a parenting failure ... God loves you in the middle of your failure. Do you believe that? That’s was Jesus was trying to tell us about our weird, weird Dad.

(3) God loves you while he is waiting for you to come home. Some of you guys might be thinking, “I don’t know if I can turn around. I’m in so deep; I’m in too deep.” Well Jesus tells this story to tell you, “No you are not! If you’ll just turn towards God, you’ll discover he’s running towards you right now!” The Bible tells us that God is so patient. It says, “He is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone (anyone) to be destroyed, but (he) wants everyone to repent (to turn around).” (2 Peter 3.9) God will not force himself on you; he won’t kidnap you and force you home. But he’s waiting, incredibly patiently, waiting for you to turn around. And when you do, he’ll come running.

One more life-changing truth. (4) You’ve got to get this: God loves you not because you are good, but because he is no ordinary father. He doesn’t love you because you are good, he loves you because he is perfectly good. So you don’t have to clean up your act first, cut your hair, lose the

nose ring, cover the tattoos, take a bath. You don't have to get down and grovel and earn your way back in. Just come home!

I think when Jesus finished his story, they must have felt like they'd been hit by a freight train. You think this idea of a Free-way is a fantasy, a myth? Well guys, God is no ordinary father. He loves you when you make poor choices, He loves you when you fail, He loves you while he waits for you to come home; guys, He loves you not because you're good, but because he's no ordinary father.

So, if you are in a pigpen right now, and you are running away from God, why don't you just silently pray this prayer. Tell him in your own words, "Jesus I want to stop running. I need you to come into my life, I need you to forgive my sins. Please set me free." If you will pray that prayer today, this will be the most decisive day of your life. Angels will be celebrating, and we will be celebrating with you. And if you pray that prayer, we'd really like you to come talk to us. Let us help you get started on your life with God – the abundant life he died to give you. There are some things we need to get done (*baptistry*).

But maybe you are a Jesus follower already, but maybe you're still stuck in guilt, you're still stuck in shame and fear, you don't feel very free. Maybe you just feel unworthy, that you've disappointed God. Just remember: there is a day when God ran to you, and guys, He has not let go of you since. Maybe you've tried to squirm and you've tried to get away from Him, but He will never stop loving you. One guy said, "It's never too late to be who you might have been." It's never too late to become God's best version of you, the you that he had in mind when He made you.

In a moment, I'm going to pray and then invite you to the worship stations around the room. On the tables you will see a tray with some little pieces of bread and some little cups of juice; they represent how far God was willing to go to get you back; they represent Jesus' body, broken for you, and his blood, shed for you. You will also find two others ways to love him back. Those little black boxes are where we who call Capital City home give our first part back to God. He deserves that, and our offerings are an act of worship. Those white buckets are our generous buckets. That's where we drop in a dollar or two if we want to. Every dollar in those buckets goes to love on people who are in a mess.

So, if you are a Jesus follower, you are invited to the worship stations. If you are not a Jesus follower, why don't you pray that prayer, and then come down here to talk with me or one of our elders or staff, and we'll help you get started on the Free-way – the path you were made for.