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<sup>28</sup> ‘The elder brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>31</sup> “My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

Luke 13:34-35

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This past week, when I was sitting in the office at the school at the beginning of the day, I heard the sounds of parents bringing their children. At one point a young son was following his father, eagerly talking about many things. The thing is, dad was probably about 2 or 3 metres ahead calling the child to keep following. All was obviously done in love, and it caused a smile. As I reflected on this, the thought of ‘communication’ came to mind, as I noticed the age difference, and style in language between the two. The child was learning each day how to communicate with his father (as language changed), but I also thought of how a father also was learning to communicate in a child’s language. In many ways, it is a parent ‘re-learning’ the language of their childhood.

As we all know, the theme of ‘communication’ is important in all our lives. We need little reminder of this. However, when it comes to ‘communication’, whilst it is easy to remember it is important, we also know it is a very complex business. All forms of industry study the ‘theory of communication’. It is important in marketing. It is important in psychology and counselling. It is important in the work-place at many levels (and one certainly does not want miscommunication between a doctor and other staff when one is sick!). ‘Communication Theory’ is studied at many levels.

We all essentially know what ‘communication’ is about. It is essentially one person attempting to convey some idea or thoughts to another person (or group of people). There are many aspects to this: formulating the thought, transmitting the thought, receiving the thought, processing the thought, and responding to the thought in some way (after all, that is the aim of ‘communication’ – to elicit some sort of response). And we all know that whilst this ‘process’ is something ‘easy’ to understand in one sense, it is a very complicated business in another. There can be external ‘white noise’ that can get in the way, and there is all sorts of ‘white noise’ in both the ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’.

When it comes to ‘communication’, we also know there are many different ‘forms’ of communication. We communicate not only with words, but also in many other ways, including the non-verbal. But essentially what is happening is one person trying to connect with another person. And this connection is not simply at a ‘notional level’. True communication involves an ‘empathy’ between

‘sender’ and ‘receiver’ (and by the way, someone can be highly empathetic but not sympathetic or compassionate. Likewise, those who seek to show compassion are not always that ‘empathetic’ in picking up clues, or always ‘sympathetic’ in terms of truly caring).

‘Empathy’ involves attempting to ‘see’ another person’s ‘world; to try to truly understand their feelings; to appreciate the other person as who they are; and to communicate true ‘understanding’.

Of course, we do not want to ‘over-complicate’ the whole idea of ‘communication. A little child from birth knows how to ‘communicate’ through sound or actions. But sometimes ‘communication’ can get a little foggy (at any age in life), and it can sometimes feel like we are ‘communicating’ through a muffled ‘string phone’. And sometimes we simply don’t want to ‘communicate’ to those around us. (And here we have not dealt whatsoever with different ‘personalities’ in terms of ‘introverted’ or ‘extroverted people, as well as different personalities in terms of truly ‘empathetic’ or those who are ‘apathetic’ in some way, or those who seek to lie or deceive or manipulate in their ‘communication’ – which is all part of the ‘white noise’, together with our fallen human nature, when it comes to ‘communication’).

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, ‘Word made flesh’, is the master of communication. One would suppose this as He is Creator of the Universe. From the first ‘word’ of creation, as also the first ‘word’ of Scripture, the eternal Son of God speaks. And so, when the incarnate Son of God speaks parables (as we listen to the parables of Jesus), God is communicating something truly profound. And the ‘communicator’ of the ‘Parable of the Lost Son’ (or the ‘Parable of the Waiting Father’) is also calling us to reflect on the theme of ‘communication – our ‘communication’ with the people around us, as well as our ‘communication’ with God Himself.

We all know the ‘Parable of the Prodigal son (‘prodigal’ means ‘reckless or extravagant living’). But the context of this is that the Pharisees and Scribes were ‘grumbling’ (murmuring) about Jesus. And Jesus told a series of stories to help us think. Not without reason has the ‘Parable of the Prodigal son’ been called the greatest short story in the world.

In this parable, Jesus tells the story of a young man who couldn’t wait to get away from home. He makes a very selfish demand of his father, he takes his inheritance and he heads out to a far country to live it up, free from the restraints of his father and his rules. What he finds in the far country is not what he expected to find. Yes, he found good times and new friends, but when his money ran out, the good times and good friends ran out too. He finds himself living with a pig farmer in the far country, working day by day feeding the pigs. He is broke, lonely and no one cares about him! When he finally reaches bottom, he comes to his senses and remembers how good things had been at home after all. He remembers that there is no place like home! He returns

home with a plan to be a servant in his father's house. But, when he returns home, he finds more there than he ever bargained for. He finds out that there really is no place like home! He is showered with extravagant love.

This story has been called the Gospel within the Gospel, since it brings out the fundamental thought of the message of grace so beautifully, the acceptance of the sinners without any merit or worthiness on their part. When we understand that a parable is an imaginary story to illustrate a spiritual point, we can quickly perceive that Jesus is using this account to teach us of God the Father's love for each of us. The fifteenth chapter of Luke is, as one commentator has called it, the golden centre of this Gospel, revealing in a wonderful way the love of the Saviour for the lost and condemned sinners. "Lost, Found, Rejoice, Celebrate" These four words best describe the fundamental theme of the parable.

Now here is a question to consider as we reflect on the theme 'communication' as also Jesus' incredible parable of the 'lost son': Do you trust God's plan for you more than you trust yourself? Are you intent on listening to God and following His direction?

In Psalm 32 we hear the Psalmist say: "While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long" (verse 3). What was the Psalmist's 'silence' about? We are not told, but Luther, perhaps not surprisingly, saw it as pride: "I did not want to recognise or acknowledge my sin." For the psalmist, release finally came through finding or being given the courage to speak up (note Psalm 32:5: Then I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.').

Who do you relate to in the story of the 'lost son'? Who do you empathise with and understand?

In the Parable of the Lost Son we are told an incredibly powerful story! In this story Jesus uses symbols. A father who symbolises who? ... God. Two sons who symbolise who?...us. Property and wealth that symbolise what? ... everything that God has to give us. Inheritance which symbolise what? ... the grace of God that has been given to us.

The ramifications for what the parable has to say about us is significant. We have all wandered away, in our foolishness thinking that we could make it on our own, without God; God is always chasing us, eager to welcome us back. God is looking for us even when we're still in the pigpen of our lives; Reconciliation happens when real repentance occurs; It's the community's obligation to celebrate those moments, when sinners come home and real breakthroughs happen. The 'parable of the prodigal son' applies to us individually and personally. And it is important that we can truly recognise our own sin, and live by daily repentance, truly rejoicing in God's extravagant love for us all in Christ Jesus.

In Christ, God has been prodigal- wild, luxurious and extravagant- with His grace. God gave us His riches at Christ's expense, His holy life lived for us and His life freely given on the cross on our behalf. Here God 'communicates' His great love to us. Jesus became the chief of sinners, taking our sins on Himself that we might become the beloved children of God. God is the great communicator. He has truly communicated His love in Christ Jesus. We rejoice in this, and seek to share that joy with others in humility and faith.

In 2 Corinthians 5:20 we hear "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Cor.5:20). The idea is of an ambassador who has an urgent message. And what is our message? 2 Corinthians 5:21 summarises this message: "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

Most conversions don't take place instantly. You don't share the gospel once, and someone believes. It takes many people and many conversations to see someone move to the gospel. And you have what it takes. You can play an important role in pointing someone to the gospel. Just take this one verse, one word, and one sentence, and you have everything it takes to share the gospel.

So here's my encouragement: memorise the one verse, one word, and one sentence in 2 Corinthians 5:21. You probably won't ever use it word for word. But you may wish to use it as a reference point. When you get a chance to explain the gospel, you may be able to do so with a little more focus. Jesus took our sin, so we could take His righteousness. God has communicated His great love us most clearly in Christ Jesus.

When we reflect on Jesus' story of the 'Prodigal son' and 'God's extravagant grace' we truly rejoice in God's incredible love for us and all people in that "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." What incredibly generous grace and love God has given us in Jesus our Saviour. This is God's message to you. This is His message to the world. So we look to Him, and rejoice in that love. Amen.