

Some of my favorite writers are Christians who write in secular magazines and newspapers, because they’re expressing their faith in a real-world environment, rather than in a Christian bubble for a Christian audience. I think that takes courage and I’m genuinely inspired by them. I recently came across an article by Elizabeth Bruenig in *The Atlantic* that resonates with me and this series we’re in. In her article titled, “Can Silicon Valley Find Christianity?” she writes, **“Silicon Valley, it seems, is coming to Jesus. There are no bad conversions, in my book; I was born and raised a Christian and remain one, and it’s good, from that standpoint, to see erstwhile nonbelievers take an interest in the faith, whatever the reason”** (“Can Silicon Valley Find Jesus?” by Elizabeth Bruenig, in *The Atlantic*) I totally resonate with her statement that from the Christian standpoint, “it’s good.... to see erstwhile nonbelievers take an interest in the faith, whatever the reason.” That belief is a big reason why we’re in our current sermon series.

So, if someone comes to church because they heard Pastor Brian “preached on Pearl Jam,” or is going to preach on the Eagles, or whatever, then great! Each song is basically just an outsized sermon illustration for the gospel message. And, so, the reason a non-believer comes to church really doesn’t matter. My goal is for the gospel to be shared and people encouraged to follow Jesus, wherever they are on that path – miles and miles into it, or still looking for the trailhead. And so that’s what this series is about, and it will draw to a conclusion next Sunday with what is probably the most recognizable song in the series.

Today is a classic from the Eagles, dovetailing well with last week’s song, “Fly Like an Eagle” (I didn’t plan things to be like that, actually). How many of us are at least familiar with the Eagles’ music? An awful lot of people around the world sure are. The Eagles are one of the biggest selling bands of all-time, with an estimated 150 million albums sold world-wide. They’ve had 5 number one songs, 6 number one albums, and are still performing concerts – in fact, they’ve had a run of concerts at the new venue in Las Vegas called

“The Sphere” where they play four concerts a month. They started in September of last year and they’re scheduled through the end of this year, and maybe they’ll end up going longer...who knows? Several of the band members – including Glen Frey, Joe Walsh, and Don Henley – have had success as solo artists as well. Original bassist Randy Meisner passed away a couple years ago; Glen Frey passed away about 9 years ago, and his son, Deacon, now plays and sings with the band for concerts in his place, as does country musician Vince Gill.

The song we’re looking at today was not their biggest hit, but most fans of the Eagles would certainly put it among their greatest hits. It’s the song, “Desperado”, originally released on their second album in 1973. Rather than reading the lyrics first today, we’re just going to dive into a performance of it. Here’s Don Henley singing it, in a live studio performance on the Howard Stern show **(Video)**...

It’s a song that expresses a longing for someone to come home...to quit squandering what they’ve got...to stop reaching for things that look good but are actually destructive to the person’s life...to let go of materialism and engage the world through love...to recognize the pain and the hunger that the person feels and let it drive them home...to quit living in isolation, because that’s a prison more than it is freedom...to open the gate and come home and experience real love. **An awful lot of people on the face of this earth, probably some here this morning, need the encouragement of words like these to turn their lives around.**

Wouldn’t you agree that there’s not much that is more painful than watching a friend or family member hurt themselves with stuff that looks fulfilling and important to them, but is actually full of deception, pain, and destruction? Don’t we want what’s best for those people in our lives? That’s what this song conveys. And maybe it’s not someone else who needs to hear a message like this, but maybe it’s some of us here this morning.

Whenever I hear this song, I think of a story that Jesus once told of a father whose youngest son wandered off, squandered everything he had in wild living, ended up starving and destitute, but opened the gate and came back to

his dad, who did in fact welcome him home in love. This song could have been that father's words to his son that he said over and over in his head or even out loud or wrote in a letter while his son was so far off. So, listen to this story that Jesus tells in Luke, chapter 15. It's a piece of fiction that Jesus tells, but it couldn't be truer. And as you listen, see if this song doesn't fit right in from dad's perspective. **(Luke 15:11-24)**

This parable has often been called "The parable of the prodigal son." We could re-title it as "the parable of the desperado." Don't the words to the song express exactly what the father would have been feeling and thinking and crying out? They're so close, with key words being exactly the same, as well as other biblical parallels such as the rainbow as a sign of hope, I have often wondered if this parable was in fact the inspiration for the song. Alas, it is not. The song came about for other reasons.

Jesus continues the story to tell about the older son's reaction to his dad throwing this party. That older son's response is one of jealousy and indignation: He's lived the straight and narrow life, always been there for the family, and can't believe that he's never been treated with a party like this. So, he refuses to come and join the festivities. The father goes out to speak with him and encourage him and explain why they're doing this. He says, **"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 15:32).

In a day and age where cell phones, text messaging, email, social media, and all the other forms of communication we have today weren't even on their radar screen, to have a son as far off as this son was...he was as good as dead. He's been written off. But what father or mother or friend wouldn't be praying that their son or daughter or loved one would get off their fences and come to their senses...open the gate and let that mom or dad or friend love them? Isn't that the prayer of every one of us who's ever had a loved one run their life into the ground? We want them to come back.

That's exactly what this younger son does in the parable. First, he has the nerve to ask for his inheritance early. My goodness...I mean, even today,

that's not a very kosher thing to do, but especially in their time. That was just unheard of. **Then he goes off and blows it all on wild living.**

Unfortunately, it still happens. People have all kinds of opportunities handed to them – educational, financial, relational...and an awful lot of people squander it all. They end up alone, alienating and hurting people who are close to them, frittering away their finances and their futures chasing after an illusion. That's true about a fair number of people around us, maybe some people here today, or maybe we once were in that place. And that's where this son got to in the story. He's blown it all. He's down and out emotionally, financially, spiritually, relationally, and more.

So, in order to pay the bills, he ends up hiring himself out to feed pigs. **We may not get it, but this was a shocking turn of events in the story.** Jesus probably did this on purpose. He's is telling this story to some Jewish religious leaders who were very stringent in their faith practice...and pigs were considered by them to be the filthiest animals on the planet. They didn't eat bacon with eggs (no Jew did, actually)...no ham sandwiches, not even a pig as a pet.

The Steinway grand piano that now sits in our house was owned by a former piano teacher here in the area. A few years after he passed away his wife wanted to give it away because it had been given to him 50 or 60 years earlier when he was a budding piano student in college. We found out about it, inquired about the piano, went to her home, my daughter played it some, we talked about our family and her desire for playing, and this gal chose us to give the piano to. It was a remarkable gift. But not the most shocking thing we experienced in that process. The most shocking thing, was that there in her Bellevue home, she had a pet pig. Full-sized, legit, snorting, tail-swishing, stout-nosed pig. It was huge, and it wandered around in her house and everything.

No Jew would do that. Pigs were off-limits. And these guys to whom Jesus is speaking were uber-stringent about these kinds of religious rules. So, for Jesus to tell this story and have the son end up feeding pigs...this would be a very shocking and perhaps somewhat humorous part of the story, though

funny in a twisted way, as the audience maybe thought with a chuckle, “he got what he deserved.” The point, however, is that he’s at the bottom. If a movie were made of him, it could be called, “Despicable He.”

And it’s at this time that he realizes he is really all alone. He had no one who cared for him. Jesus says that no one gave him any food, in spite of how hungry he was. He might have had people in his life, but they didn’t care for him. And that’s a very lonely place. And it’s then that he comes to his senses, gets down off those fences, opens the gate, lets his pain and his hunger drive him home, and lets somebody love him. And not just anybody, at that: but he lets his father love him.

And by the reaction of the father, it’s clear that he desperately wanted his son to return home. It was his heart’s desire that his son be with him. What mom or dad doesn’t want that? Or what friend doesn’t want that for their friend who’s in a bad place in life?

What’s interesting is that while in this story there’s some good modeling on parenting and forgiveness, and some more modeling on being a friend to someone who hits rock bottom and then comes to us for support, while the older brother is a negative illustration of pride and selfishness...none of those things are why Jesus told this story. He told it to illustrate the love that his heavenly father has for people; the part of creation that is made in his image. In other words: **It’s a story about God’s love for people, including you and me.** No matter how far away from God we may have wandered, no matter how much we’ve rejected the fine things he’s put before us on our tables, no matter how much we’ve squandered away life, hurt ourselves, or hurt others...God welcomes us home. This is what Jesus is communicating here. In fact, He’s looking for us, just as the father in the story was looking for his son – he saw him from a long way off and ran out to greet him and welcome him. And God does the same thing with us. All we have to do is come to him. No matter how far you’ve wandered from God, he wants you to come to him so he can love you and help you live as his son or daughter and be all that he’s created you to be, starting with being in relationship with your Creator.

And this brings us to one final thought that ties this passage and the song together. Don Henley sings near the end of the song, “come down from your fences, open the gate.” This word, “gate” is an interesting choice of words to use. It’s not a word that you find too often in pop-rock songs written by singers who often live in cities like London, New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, and so forth. But he used it here. And Jesus used it about himself, too. He said, **“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture...I have come that they have life, and have it to the full” (Jesus, in John 10:9-10).** Jesus doesn’t say if the younger son in the story came through a gate in leaving the pigs or arriving at his father’s house, but that would have been pretty standard in their culture. Even their cities oftentimes had walls around them, with gates for people to go through to enter in. And Jesus says that the gate we go through to come home to our heavenly father is Jesus. If we want to reconnect with God our Creator and heavenly father, Jesus is the way there. He is the gate.

You know, this story that he tells may have been fiction, but God’s love for you and me is as real as this moment. And so, if we’ve been running away from our heavenly father, turning away from the “fine things that have been set upon our tables”...if the things that seem to be pleasing us are in fact hurting us and pulling us away from loved ones and pulling us away from God...know that: **God is looking for us to come home to him: to open that gate and come to our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ, and be loved by him.** As the Eagles sang, “before it’s too late, you better let somebody love you.” And Jesus is the only “somebody” who loves you so much that he died on the cross for you and will love you into eternity. So, no matter how far you’ve wandered away from the love of your heavenly Father, he welcomes you home. And that’s good news for the “desperado” that’s in all of us. Let’s pray...Amen.