

Have you heard the phrase, “elevator pitch,” sometimes referred to as an “elevator speech”? An elevator speech is a clear, brief message in which you get your point across in about the time it takes to get on and off an elevator with someone, as it goes between floors. Since your time is limited, your message has to be concentrated and compelling. So now that we’ve established the concept, here’s your assignment. If you had to give an elevator speech about God, what would you say?

How can we describe God in human words? If the universe cannot contain him, how can mere human words contain or confess who he is? Let me give you a couple of examples. First, we use terms like “Holy Trinity,” but we can never fully grasp the meaning. We can only go so far in defining the three in one. Another example is when we say that God is “just.” We cannot comprehend what that means, because the mere human justice we experience cannot compare to his perfect justice. It seems as if every time we think we have God fully in a box of our making, and just as we prepare to drive the last nail into that box, he taps us on the shoulder and asks what we’re building.

So how can we speak of God? Luther explained the first article of the Creed with words that help: “He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All of this he does out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey him.” All of our efforts pale when we realize that, when all is said and done, what we really need to know is God’s “fatherly, divine goodness and mercy.” And amazingly, despite our limited understanding, we can in fact begin to comprehend this because Jesus shows us the Father’s heart.

In every language, there are some words that are so rich in meaning that it’s impossible to find an equivalent word in another language. In the Hebrew language there is this marvelous word *chesed*. *Chesed* embraces the ideas of loving kindness, love, steadfastness, faithfulness, favor, and grace. English translations vary, but *chesed* points us to the very nature of our God, who is love. The Psalmist writes, “for as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his *chesed* towards those who fear him.” The height and breadth of the *chesed* of God (that is, his loving kindness, faithfulness, grace, and love) is so boundless that it reaches from heaven to earth.

How we need that steadfast love, that *chesed*, of the father! Our sin is so deep and so profound that we can never reach to heaven. We see the evidence every day. We hear of wars and rumors of war. We watch as our fellow human beings engage in terrorism and murder. We see life given by God treated as an inconvenience to be disposed of as we wish.

But we might say, “Well, we’ve started no wars. We are not terrorists or murderers. We don’t treat life cheaply.” But have you looked into your heart, I mean, really looked at what’s there? Can any of us say that we’ve never hated, never been greedy, never broken any part of God’s law? And these days as we’re shopping for one more... No, one more... No, just one more

package to put under the tree, have we never been a little jealous of others or discontented about what we have? Is that any different from what moves one nation to seize the territory or resources of another nation? Is that honoring our God, who gives us every good thing, any more than doing violence in the name of a false God? And as these days we run here and there, not only to the mall, but to parties and concerts and the post office, supposedly preparing for the birth of a baby, have we been too busy to think about those with actual life-changing needs? Or have we remained in self-protecting mode? Surely we must confess that God's mercy comes "without any merit or worthiness in us."

Despite all this, we have been made children of the Heavenly Father. He has bound himself to us. And this is true because his *chesed* extends to the depths of humanity where we live. So great is the Father's loving-kindness, grace, and kindness to sinners that he reached from heaven to earth at a cost that we cannot fathom. A world lost in sin could only be redeemed by the joining of God the Creator to man the creature. And so he sent his only begotten Son to be born as the child of Mary and the brother of all humanity. He came to bear the sin of the world as the holy Lamb of God, the one final sacrifice. He came so that the beautiful words of Psalm 103 would speak the greatest truth, "...as far as the east is from the West, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." All of our rebellion against God would be placed as far from us as the sunrise is from the sunset.

See the *chesed* of God in his son! See him preaching the gospel to those who live in darkness. See him reaching out in love to embrace tax collectors and other sinners rejected by those who thought themselves to be righteous. See him loving and calling to himself those who live on the fringes of society; lepers, Samaritans, and so many others. See him giving a meal to his disciples on the night in which he was betrayed, his blessed body and blood given for his Church of all ages. See him on a cross with thieves crucified on either side, and listen to him say to the repentant thief, "Today you will be with me in paradise." See him placed in the tomb of death and in love rising again to destroy death. See him commission his disciples to go to all the world to baptize in his name, and in the name of his Father and the Holy Spirit and to teach them all that he had commanded.

This Jesus told a story that reveals His Father's heart. We heard it a few minutes ago. It's often called the parable of the Prodigal Son. It's really the story of two ways to be lost, as displayed by the younger and older brothers, but we're not going in that direction today. What I will say is this:

The younger brother discovered the way back to his Father, there among the pigs. It was simple. He admitted his lost-ness. If you can admit that by yourself you are lost, then you are ready for the Gospel. And the Gospel is that Jesus justifies your existence. You don't have to justify your existence to God because He has already justified your existence in Jesus. The mission Jesus accomplished means that you are loved already! You don't have to earn it, nor could you. God thought you were so valuable that he sent his Son to the cross to purchase you. You don't have to make yourself more attractive to him, nor could you. This is *chesed*—

undeserved kindness of God. When you return to him sincerely admitting your lost-ness, out come the gifts. The fattened calf. The ring, the robe, the party in your honor. That's what it means to have a new life. The Father runs to lost children who return to him.

Jesus is divine *chesed* in human flesh. He is the manifestation of the father's great mercy bestowed on his wayward children. In just a few more days, Advent will come to an end. For many weeks we've prayed, "Come, Lord Jesus." Very soon, we will celebrate the great miracle of Bethlehem, where the *chesed*, the compassion of God, revealed in the baby of Mary, showed his sacred face. He also comes to you and me in this very moment. And the day is also coming when he will return, and all who have died in Christ will rise as he rose on Easter.

With the Church of every age, we join our prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus!"