

Finding Our Way Home

Luke 15:11-32

March 31, 2019

If there was ever a Sunday when most of us know the biblical passage at the centre of our reflection, surely it is today. My guess is that most of us here have personally read Luke's story of the Prodigal Son, heard sermons on it, or at least have some familiarity with the plot.

It's said to be the readers digest version of the gospel as it contains all the ingredients of grace, repentance, faith, forgiveness, restoration, and salvation. But, is it just my imagination, or has it possibly become so familiar that we simply miss the point? Has the shock value worn off? Just say the opening line, "There was a man who had two sons," and we know where this one is going. At the very least the story can so easily lead us to miss the minefields Luke lays down to make us think. As soon as we read, "a man had two sons," we are ready to skim over the details because we can already hear the band's opening number for the joyful dance jig at the end. We are untroubled by the son's anguished lament, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son," because the aroma of fatted calf roasting on the spit wafts over the narrative, and covers up the stench of the pigsty. We know that, like all good American dramas, good will triumph and the boy will come home; he always does.

As Tom Long reminds us in his article on this passage, our over familiarity with this story has allowed what was once a parable with trap doors and mysterious and unexpected depths, degenerate into a kind of fable with a moral tag. Instead of knocking our socks off with the surprise of the father improbably hiking up his skirts and dashing down the road shouting for joy and calling for "A robe! A ring! And sandals!" the story coos a little cultural wisdom in our ear: "Hey, no matter how badly you have messed up life, pick yourself up. A ready supply of forgiveness is waiting, and you can start over where you left off." The prodigal son becomes the "Comeback Player of the Year." After all everybody comes back don't they? Sinatra came back, Hugh Grant came back, and the great Ali came back. The Prodigal inevitably comes back.

Let's start at the beginning. Jesus is in the company of tax collectors and sinners. On the outside of the circle stand the Pharisees and scribes, the religious legal troops. Not only does Jesus interact with these social outcasts who wouldn't even be allowed in the synagogue, but he even eats with them. Tax collectors were seen as collaborators with the Romans and sinners were those who don't keep the law. This is the grumbling we hear coming from the horrified religious establishment police. Jesus should know better. Luke puts together three parables to meet this religious intolerance: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the two brothers. Each parable emphasizes that God delights in finding the lost one. In the parable of the two sons we learn a much more layered, much more complex, answer.

This is not a self-help parable. It's not about the predictability of God showing up with the party hats, like the cuckoo in the clock popping out at the precise time. Surely this parable screams at us that we can't throw our own party. The initiative for the rebel's salvation comes right from the father in the parable. The fact that he's at the gate with open arms ought to be a huge surprise, so unexpected and undeserved that it throws us off kilter. It's just not what we expect.

We don't expect grace to win our hearts. We are programmed with a chip inside us, telling us very insistently that our spiritual wholeness depends on us. "Grace" is best known as a name for our daughters, not a word in our everyday lexicon underpinning our lives. This computer chip in us always points us away from dependence on God's grace to our own independent efforts at self improvement. We just find it natural to do something to win God's favour.

Do an interview at King and James in Hamilton, or in Greensville, and the following will represent the conventional wisdom out there: forgiveness is dished out by God in proportion to how sincere, how spiritual, how devoted, or simply how good we are. The parable instead asks us, "Get rid of the embedded chip that continues to make you say I must try harder to be acceptable to God."

It might be helpful to ask who we identify with, the Pharisees who grumble at Jesus acceptance of sinners, or the sinners welcomed at Jesus dinner table? My guess is that most of us can move from one group to the other without even realizing it. Folk in the churches Luke

is writing to probably had some of these tendencies to judge others harshly, and to look down on those outside their church group as sinners. And similarly we today, in this church and in all our churches, play the judgmental game, elevating our self righteousness as a mark of status and correctness. It's something we drift into naturally and we need to be alert to the temptation to fall into this attitude.

Similarly, who do you identify with in this parable of the two sons? Surely this is not a story of good and bad characters, one a lost son and the other the good son who stayed home. In fact I think Jesus is telling us that both are lost in different ways. As Joan Chittister reminded me in her article in the National Catholic Reporter, life is never that simple. She says: *From one perspective, the gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Lent is not really about three separate people at all. No, the gospel is not about three discrete individuals as much as it is, surely, about the tug of each of these archetypes in the center of ourselves.*

I want you to look at Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son.

Henri Nouwen spent a lot of time studying this painting and wrote a very helpful book, **The Return of the Prodigal Son**. He directs our attention to the father's hands sitting gently on the young son's shoulders. We notice the son's shaved head, his torn clothing, his exhausted, emaciated body and his scarred feet. This is a young man who has lost everything and has made a long journey home. The father, on the other hand, is open, gracious, welcoming, with the light emanating from his face lighting up the kneeling son. The father's love is powerful and at the same time gentle. To the right stands the elder son who is stiff, erect, hands clasped, with a great distance separating him from the welcome of his brother.

Sometimes I am like the elder brother, critical, judgemental, unforgiving and self righteous. Sometimes I am like the Father, welcoming, gracious, forgiving, with arms open to my brothers and sisters. And sometimes I am the young brother, rebellious, lost, repentant, confessing my sins, traveling home. And sometimes I am like the other two women and man in Rembrandt's portrait who look on as observers. I stay on the sidelines, observe, don't get my hands

dirty, and don't get too involved or passionate about the lost. I wonder who you are you today? Who in the story do you identify with?

We are surely all at some point the son who has gone off to far off land and found ourselves lost and alone. Surely this is a journey all of us have taken, far from God, from our father, from our true home. We have all been there at some point, maybe you are still there. It's not an easy place to live. There is a hollowness, a certain indefinable meaningless to life when we are out of relationship with the Father.

I know that the philosophy of our modern age tells us that following our dream, getting as much as we can in life, will satisfy and make us happy. And certainly there is some truth to that idea. But there is a down side to that belief, namely that it misses what is central to our core identity: we are created in God's image. Our true happiness is discovered when this core is related to the one who made us.

The lost son ended up-in the pig pen with nothing to nourish his weakened body and nobody to help him. When he came to himself, when he took the first step toward repentance, to acknowledging his lostness, he began a journey home.

He didn't make the outcome happen. He is still only rehearsing his script of regret and is probably uncertain of his welcome. It is the father's doing that the son is welcomed, embraced, given a party hat and established in the family estate once more. It is simply grace! The father's love, forgiveness and grace is what changes everything. He's been at the window watching, waiting, and hoping for his return. The same is true for us. God is waiting; the party hats are ready; the barbeque is lit and the invitations have been sent out. God wants us to come home. Come, for all things are ready, Jesus said.

We don't know the end of the story. We don't know if the elder brother ever reconciled himself to the father or his brother. If you are that elder brother, and I suggest that we in the church, probably have more of the elder brother in us than any of the others in the parable, we need to refocus on this parable for ourselves.

What we do know is likely is that the religious police addressed in these parables probably didn't have a change of heart. Some

perhaps! But the majority didn't. They ended up seeking Jesus' crucifixion.

What we do know is that even the good son who stayed home and obeyed is also lost and needs to come home. And the encouragement is that his father wouldn't have given up on him either. Nor does God ever give up on us.

Amen