

## “THE LOST SON”

Luke 15:11-24

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*Introduction to scripture:* Today begins three Sundays of reflection on one of Jesus’ best known parables, which is usually referred to as the “Parable of the Prodigal Son.” Jerry and I will be making use of this wonderful book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, by Henri Nouwen, which reflects on both the text from Luke’s gospel and Rembrandt’s famous painting. It’s a book well worth reading.

In Luke’s gospel, we find this parable immediately following the shorter parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, and it has a similar theme in a much longer and more complex story. The context is important: Jesus told these parables in response to a criticism that was levelled at him by some of the respected religious folk in the community: They saw the people who were coming to listen to Jesus, and complained, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!”

This parable – about welcoming a sinner - offers a picture of the love of God, within a story of family dynamics we can probably recognize – the story of two brothers and their father. Today, we are just going to read the first part, which focuses on the younger brother

*Read Luke 15:11-24*

Artist’s pictures of this story, from Rembrandt’s to those by unknown artists, usually show a tender moment of loving reunion. They are scenes of joy; sometimes you see the father running to meet his son, sometimes you can see, in the background, preparations for a celebration. But if you look closely, you find that the prodigal son is always in rags, and generally looks like he has been through a disaster of some kind. The sense of misery and brokenness is still there. It’s so important, in reading this story, to keep in mind that “the immense joy in welcoming back the lost son hides the immense sorrow that has gone before.” (Nouwen, p. 34) This is a serious story about deep brokenness. Perhaps that is why so much of this story feels familiar. Perhaps that’s why, of all Jesus’ parables, this one seems to evoke the strongest emotions.

When we turn our attention to the younger son, that emotion may be outrage – we may want to scold him. It may be pity - we may feel sorry for him. Or it may be something closer to understanding; maybe we identify with him because we have been there too.

If you feel like you want to yell at the young man in this story, I don’t think you are alone. When we hear about his actions, we want to berate him for being so foolish and greedy, so

ungrateful and selfish, so uncaring about the heartache he's inflicted on his father, so wasteful and short-sighted, so self-destructive, ... you name it, we could go on and on, couldn't we?

It is easy to catalog somebody else's failures, especially when they are different from our own, especially when they are as flagrant, expensive, destructive, and public as this young man's. Perhaps if we have personal experience with somebody who has caused this kind of heartache, this story taps into the hurt and anger we carry. And perhaps our instinct is to say, "He should have known better, and he has no one but himself to blame for his troubles. He deserves to suffer the consequences."

But maybe we can also feel a little tiny bit sorry for him, too. After all, isn't it true that the often most painful and humiliating suffering is the suffering we bring on ourselves? Even if we can see how wrong this guy's actions have been, we understand that many a young person makes foolish, thoughtless, impulsive decisions without completely comprehending the consequences or the impact of their actions on others. (Many a not-so-young person does, too!) We may wonder how it is that his life got so off track. We know there are endless temptations out there. We might consider that addiction of some kind played a role. We can easily imagine so-called friends who were bad influences or unscrupulous people taking advantage of inexperience to relieve him of his money. And he met with bad luck, besides. Surely he couldn't have known there'd be a famine, or a pandemic, or a recession. Or that nobody would care enough to help. He thought he was on a big adventure but it's turned into a disaster, and he is to be pitied. To be reduced to living with pigs and eating what they ate – there is hardly anywhere lower to fall.

We may agree that he's brought this on himself, maybe even that he deserves to suffer some consequences, but I think most of us can't look at such abject poverty and lostness without *some* compassion, without feeling that there should be a way out, some sort of relief or hope or a helping hand toward a better way of life.

Maybe our reaction to this lost son goes beyond compassion to genuine understanding: maybe we can identify with him.

Maybe some of you have also found yourselves in a similar place, having to live with regret or seemingly insurmountable troubles as a result of choosing a foolish or destructive path. Maybe you know what it's like to look for love in all the wrong places. Maybe you've been responsible for causing hurt to others. Maybe you know what it is to have been tempted beyond your power to resist by things or people or pursuits that let you down in the end. Maybe you know what it is to be lost, to feel you have nowhere to belong, to believe you are not worthy of love or forgiveness. Maybe this story resonates with your story.

Others of us probably *don't* identify very strongly with this wayward son, at least initially. Henri Nouwen says that at first he didn't. (p. 36-37) But he came to realize that he had "left home," "over and over," that he had often turned away from God's blessing and presence and love, looking instead for validation in other places. He suggests that it just may be hard for us human

beings to believe that we are loved – beloved – for ourselves. So many voices tell us that we have to somehow *prove* our worth. Listening to those voices can lead us away from the place where we are loved to the “distant country” far from our true home, just as something lured the younger son to leave his father and family.

Henri Nouwen says this better than I can. He writes: “I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found. Why do I keep ignoring the place of true love and persist in looking for it elsewhere? Why do I keep leaving home where I am called a child of God, the beloved of my Father? I am constantly surprised at how I keep taking the gifts God has given me... and keep using them to impress people, receive affirmation and praise, and compete for rewards, instead of developing them for the glory of God. Yes, I often carry them off to a “distant country” and put them in service of an exploiting world that does not know their true value. It’s almost as if I want to prove to myself and to my world that I do not need God’s love, that I can make a life on my own, that I want to be fully independent. Beneath it all is the great rebellion, the radical “no” to the Father’s love.” (Nouwen, p. 43)

The people who heard Jesus tell this story would have known that the prodigal son’s actions represented a “radical ‘no’” to his father’s love. They would have found the premise of the parable profoundly shocking, something that simply would never have happened in real life. No son would have dared to make request like this one did; and no father would have granted it. To ask for half his inheritance in advance, and then to go off and waste it is an act of utter disrespect. A rejection not only of father, family, and home, but also of his own identity, his place and responsibility in the community, the values of his society and faith. It is so offensive as to be unthinkable.

And yet... the parable’s message seems to be that each one of us, at some time or other, is the prodigal, has said that same “radical ‘no’” to the love of God, ‘no’ to the inclusive community Jesus calls us to, ‘no’ to the values of the kingdom and to the life God intends for us. We are all the wayward and child, far from home. Everybody gets separated from the love of God, and we feel the effects of that separation.

Of course, we all want to find our way “home,” to where we belong, to the lives we are supposed to be living, to the persons we are meant to be. I love how the parable describes the moment when the lost son realizes this: “he came to himself.” That was where the journey back began.

But the way home is hard. It requires telling the truth, being honest about the trouble we’re in, admitting the ways we’ve been wrong, acknowledging our brokenness and our need. It means we have to truly want a different life. Henri Nouwen thinks that coming home to God means “living the beatitudes” – embracing the values Jesus teaches in the sermon on the mount, like humility, purity of heart, peacemaking.

This is all so hard. It's so not what we are inclined to, or socialized to. So different from what we usually think will make us happy. As Nouwen says (and I think he's right), "One of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive forgiveness."

When I look closely at Jesus' parable of this lost son, I'm not entirely clear about whether he does or doesn't receive his father's forgiveness. Certainly the father offers it – along with a loving and joyful embrace – and no hint of recriminations. Just as the son's bad behavior is "over the top" in this story, so is the father's grace – far beyond what any father in real life could give. That's a clue that the story Jesus is really telling is about the love of God. The story suggests that the father's love carries the day, and we assume that a happy celebration and reconciliation ensues, but Jesus doesn't actually tell us about the son's response.

We know he comes asking, not for a home, really, but only to have the position and wages of a servant; he knows he's given up his claim as a child and heir, but believes his father is a fair employer. That's a far cry from his former life but way better than watching pigs and eating garbage. We don't know what he expects. Rejection? Anger? A grudging acceptance for which he'll have to pay, over and over? It seems he has underestimated his father's love for him, which turns out to be lavish and unconditional and unending in spite of all the hurt and heartache that has gone before. The welcome is all gratitude, compassion, joy, and love. We can feel the emotions of that moment – so powerful they bring tears.

But we aren't told what the son says, or does, or feels. Jesus leaves that open for us to imagine. Can he come all the way home? Can he let himself accept forgiveness, believe he has a place, be broken open and healed again by the power of love? Maybe the moment is open-ended on purpose - so that we can find *ourselves* in that loving embrace, in that joyful "welcome home" moment, in the question of whether we will let receive forgiveness, and let ourselves be healed by love.

Amen.

Resources:

Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*

Essays by J. William Harkins, Raj Nadella, and Christopher Edmonston on Luke 15:11-35, in *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, volume 2*