

Another Look at the Parable of the Prodigal Son: The Younger Son

Approach Luke 15:1,2,11-24 1/17/21

I would be willing to bet that this sermon is the only one being preached today in Gettysburg, or Adams County, or maybe in the whole state that refers to cat juggling! Listen for it! At any rate, the parable of the Prodigal Son is one of Jesus' best-known and most-loved stories. Many of us learned it in Sunday School and have heard many sermons preached about it! But, I wonder if we've really understood the impact that this parable would have had on Jesus' original listeners, some of whom would have been enraged by it! So, I'd like us to take a fresh look at this parable and see how it might speak to us today! We begin by putting the parable in its context. What prompted Jesus to tell this story?

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³So he told them this parable: (Luke 15:1-3) In fact, Jesus the told them three parables, and ours is the third. Tax collectors and other sinners- social outcasts- were hanging out with Jesus! The Gospels tell us in many places that these kinds of "lowlifes" enjoyed being with Jesus! And he was comfortable hanging out with them! He even ate with them, which signified acceptance of them, and he taught them and healed them. On the other hand, the

religious leaders- Pharisees and scribes- would have nothing to do with such riffraff, believing that associating with them would spiritually taint them somehow. And they criticized Jesus for spending time with them. In response to their criticism, Jesus told them three parables. The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

In the first one, a shepherd leaves 99 sheep behind and goes searching for a lost one, rejoicing when he has found it. In the second, a woman loses one of her ten silver coins, and turns her house upside down until she finds it, sharing her good news with her neighbors. In both cases, Jesus compares the joy at finding the lost object to God's joy in finding lost people. That brings us to the third parable.

¹¹Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, 'How

many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:11-24)

You can see the parallels to the other two parables- something that was lost (in this case a son) is found, resulting in great joy and celebration. But let's look more closely at the story. The younger son makes an extraordinary request of his father: "Give me my share of the inheritance." While such a thing was not unheard of, it was rare and extremely disrespectful. He is literally treating his father as if he were dead, and as if he were just a human ATM! The surprise here is that rather than disowning him, the father grants his request. This probably involved selling off some

of his property, which would have resulted in a loss of status in his community, but he did it, for unexplained reasons.

Consistent with such a poorly-formed character, the son goes away and blows through all of his father's hard-earned money with "dissolute" living. I have to confess that I needed to look up the meaning of "dissolute." I think the old King James Version said "riotous" living, which sounds like more fun! But, "dissolute" means "indifferent to moral restraints." So, perhaps gambling or prostitutes or heavy drinking or wild orgies? Maybe even dwarf tossing or cat juggling! (There it is!) Use your imagination.

There are different kinds of sin, sins of commission and sins of omission, for example. In this case, the younger son commits a type of sin that is familiar to us as Americans. He had an approach to life that was based solely on personal freedom and individual rights. His theme song was the old Isley Brother's tune, "It's Your Thing- Do what you want to do!" Who cares what the impact is on those around you- your family and community, for example? You have the right to do what you want with your life. And that's what he did. But it didn't get him the fulfillment he was hoping for, did it?

When the money was gone, the young man had to provide for himself, but a famine complicated things, throwing the world into a

recession. He ended up working for a pig farmer, which is about as low as a good Jewish boy can go! And he was still hungry. So, the story tells us that “he came to himself,” which is a wonderful phrase. He remembered who he really was- the son of a loving father- and he made a plan to return home; He would repent and grovel for a job as a hired servant. Maybe he even thought he could repay what he had taken from his father over time. But he decided to return home, humble and contrite.

What happens next is completely unexpected. The father sees him coming from far away and runs out to meet him! He has already forgiven him and is excited to see him. Now, family patriarchs did not run to meet people in the ancient world! They were too dignified for that. People came to them, showing respect and honor. But this father ran and embraced his returning son, the son who had turned his back on him and disrespected him.

Rembrandt’s picture of this moment in the story hangs in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. A number of years ago, Presbyterian pastor, Earl Palmer, was on a tour of the Hermitage, guided by an Russian art historian. She pointed out Rembrandt’s painting to them, saying, “See how the blind father blesses his son.” Palmer immediately interrupted the guide, who may have been an expert on art, but not on the Bible! “No,” he said. “The father in the story is not blind. In fact, it is

crucial to the story that he can see well. For, even after waiting a long time, he is watching for the return of his son so he can welcome him home. And he spots him far away and runs to embrace him!" Palmer was right, of course!

Before the son can even get through his carefully-rehearsed speech, the father honors him with gifts- clothing him with the best robe, a ring, and shoes. These gifts convey that he is indeed still his son and not a servant. And, he prepares a great feast to celebrate the return of his lost son!

When South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu was asked what his favorite Bible verse was, he responded, "Romans 5:8. 'While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.' It sums up the gospel wonderfully, he said. We think we have to impress God so that God could love us. But (God) says, 'No, you are loved already, even at your worst.'" (end quote) That's the message of this first part of the story of the Prodigal Son. No matter where you've been. No matter what you've done, God still loves you and stands ready to welcome you home.

If you identify with the younger brother (like those tax collectors and other sinners), please hear this message. God is welcoming you home! God stands ready to welcome home all who have fallen away from him, be that through pleasures, addictions, lusts, greed, jealousies, or just plain self-centeredness. Will you come home?

In the late 1700's John Newton left the life of a ruthless slave trader to follow Jesus. He eventually became a pastor and advocated for the abolition of slavery. He also wrote hymns, including "Amazing Grace," our closing hymn today. When he was nearing the end of his life, and his memory was fading, someone suggested that he should retire from ministry. He replied, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!" That's all you need to remember!

Next week, we'll look at the second part of the parable, which will complicate things significantly!