

Another Look at the Parable of the Prodigal Son: What's the Point?

Luke 15:11-32 1/31/21

The last two Sundays we have looked together at the parable of the Prodigal Son. We finish that series this morning by asking “What do we do with this story?” Listen carefully as I read the parable once again looking for things you may have missed before!

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. ²⁵"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'" (Luke 15:11-32)

Many of you have seen the 1984 film, "Amadeus," based on Peter Shaffer's play of the same name. It tells the story of classical composer, Antonio Salieri, who makes a bargain with God, praying, "Lord, make me a great composer!... Make me famous through the world, dear God!... In return I vow I will give you my chastity, my industry, and my deepest humility every hour of my life. And I will help my fellow man all I can." Salieri keeps his side of the bargain, staying chaste, working hard, and helping poor musicians. And his career goes well.

And then Mozart appears on the scene with gifts far surpassing those of Salieri. It is clear that Mozart, whose middle name "Amadeus" means "Beloved by God," must have received his astounding talent from God. But Mozart has made no vow to God and is a vulgar, womanizing, self-centered, younger-brother type. Yet God has blessed him with unprecedented musical genius.

Salieri is not happy. His jealousy and resentment grows and eventually consumes him, even destroying his relationship with God. He says to the Lord, "From now on we are enemies, you and I." He is enraged by the unfairness of the situation. It becomes clear that his sacrifices and good deeds were all for his gain, and not for God. They were useful tools to get what he wanted- fame and glory.

The story of Salieri and Mozart contains strong echoes of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. It reminds us of the vanity of pursuing a fulfilling life through the moralistic approach of the older brother. But it also portrays the futility of dedicating your life to pursuing pleasure. After all, Mozart's hedonistic life doesn't turn out well, either, and he died a poor man at the age of 35! Both approaches to finding the good life ultimately fail, just as they did in Jesus' parable. I'm reminded of the book of Ecclesiastes, where the writer also tried in vain to find fulfillment- by exploring first wisdom, then pleasure, and then hard work. "*Vanity of vanities,*" says the teacher, "*vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*" (Eccl. 1:2) So where does that leave us? How do we find a good, fulfilling life?

The parable gives us the direction we need. In the story, the father's only desire is for a good relationship with both of his sons. He loves them both and wants to be reconciled to both of them, so he reaches out to them in the hope that will happen. It clearly works with the younger brother, who repents and is embraced by his father. The parable doesn't tell us what happens with the elder brother. The offer of reconciliation is there, but his response is unknown.

Let's explore a little more deeply how this all works. How does a right relationship with the father lead to a fulfilling life? The younger brother's decision to reject his father and explore all the pleasures of life far from

home shows a lack of trust and respect for his father. Had he been able to trust that his father had his best interests at heart and would provide graciously for him, perhaps he wouldn't have needed to take such reckless action. A restored relationship with his father will satisfy his new longing for the stability and comfort of home, negating any need to live so self-indulgently.

The elder brother, on the other hand, seemed to be insecure in his relationship with his father, believing that he needed to work hard and live in perfect obedience to earn his father's love. This led to tremendous resentment when his father's love was showered on his brother, who made no sacrifices to earn it. He resented both his brother, and his father, whose love for his younger son seemed both unjust and foolish. It clearly caused a rupture in their relationship.

But if the elder brother were truly reconciled with his father, really secure in his father's love for him simply because he was his father's son, perhaps he would no longer be so driven to earn his father's love. He could give up his anger and resentment when others who seem less deserving received his blessing. Both brothers could experience an inner peace if they were reconciled with their father. And we can, too! And that leads to the second benefit of a renewed relationship with the father.

The relationship between the brothers could be restored. As the younger brother trusts the father to meet his needs, he can attend to the needs of others rather than frantically pursuing his own desires. He can become a much better brother! Likewise, if the elder brother learned to rest in the love and acceptance of his father, he could look out for the needs of his brother, rather than competing against him for the affections of his father. A renewed relationship with the father, and the healing it brings to the soul of each brother could lead to healing in the relationship between them. That's the way it's supposed to work! When we are reconciled to our Heavenly Father, whether we're more like the younger brother or the elder brother, our relationships with others can also be repaired and healed. That's wonderful news, and it goes even farther than that!

Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address was delivered on March 4, 1865, just days before the end of the Civil War. In it, he called for healing between North and South, who had been engaged in a brutal campaign that had wounded almost every family in the nation. "With malice toward none," he said, "with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Where on earth did Lincoln find the magnanimity and grace to make such a plea, after having been so personally bruised and battered by that hated war?

We find the answer in the numerous references to God, providence, and the scriptures in his brief speech. In particular, Lincoln expresses a trust that God is in charge of all things and knows what he is doing. Lincoln feels secure, and believes that the nation is secure in God's providence. Because of that, he can let go of wrongs done and embrace the Secessionists as brothers and sisters once again. Now, he does not compromise his belief that slavery is evil, which he clearly identifies as the cause of the war, but with that matter settled, he is ready and prepares the nation to be ready for reconciliation.

That's the final outcome of our reconciliation with God- the reconciliation of society. In modern times we have seen that work out in places like South Africa, Germany, Rwanda, and Romania, where Christians have worked hard to bring about justice and peace following deep divisions and conflict. And, that is God's intent. It's not just about Jesus and me- about my personal salvation and reconciliation with God, as important as that is. It's also about my reconciliation with those around me, and about the reconciliation of the world, both within and between nations.

That's God's ultimate goal according to the Bible. What part will we play in that?

Begin with your own reconciliation with God. Come home and accept his embrace. And then let it work outward to your relationships with others, and throughout our society. Confidence in the love and care of God changes everything.