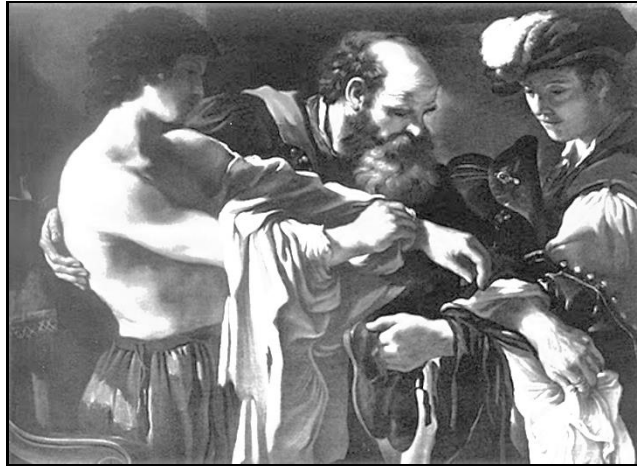


LESSONS FROM A PRODIGAL



"Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him." Luke 15:22b
By artist Guercino (1591 – 1666) painted in 1619

Scripture:

Psalm 32

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ²Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

⁶Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

⁷You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. *Selah*

⁸I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. ⁹Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD. ¹¹Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

¹Now 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:

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.’”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



LESSONS FROM A PRODIGAL

This Prodigal Son parable is one of the most well-known of all the parables. Even among non-Christians, this story is known and understood widely. Maybe that is because many of our families include someone like the prodigal son, someone estranged from the family for various reasons, behaving as if their family of origin doesn't matter.

Or you may know someone whose family member only shows up when free food and a party is happening, the one considered the black sheep or the one who decides he can make it on his own without family.

The word prodigal as a noun means: one who spends or gives lavishly and foolishly or one who has returned after a long absence.

This story of The Prodigal Son is so well known around the world that even Buddhism has a version of it but with a different ending. In the Buddhist version, the story emphasizes how the God figure (the Father) draws the son closer and closer to him by giving him jobs before he finally recognizes his own father. It was written before The Prodigal Son parable in the Bible. (The Buddhist Prodigal Son story is part of their sacred text called the *Lotus Sutra*, which was composed at the end of the second century BC. The Prodigal Son teaching of Mahayana Buddhism was written about two-hundred years before Jesus was born.) There is speculation that Jesus was aware of Buddhist teachings. This is possible because he lived along the Silk Road.

THE SILK ROAD

By the time Jesus was born trans-Eurasian trade had taken place on a regular basis and religious beliefs were also shared along the trade routes.

The Silk Road was built in the year 130 BCE. It stretched all the way from China to Jerusalem and

then turned North towards Rome. Remember the wisemen came to see the baby Jesus from the east? It is possible the wisemen were from Persia or maybe from as far as Mongolia or China.

Despite the possible eastern influence, it is clear that Jesus used the story of the Prodigal son to provide a vivid example of God's unconditional love and forgiveness. As his disciples, we are expected to be as loving and forgiving as the father in the parable.

What other lessons can we learn from the way Jesus taught this parable?

- First, it is good to observe that this parable is the last of three parables with a foundational theme of God rejoicing when the lost are found. First, he starts with the parable of the Lost Sheep, then the Lost Coin, and the third of the trilogy is the Lost Son. The major lesson among them all is: When those who are lost are found, there is much rejoicing in all the household of God (Luke 15:4-32).
- Another lesson invites us to consider the attitude of the older son. Why did Jesus include another older son in the story? In the Jewish tradition, the first born is the son who automatically gets the lion's share of the father's inheritance. So, the parable is written in a way for us to understand that the first son doesn't have anything to complain about. His life is all taken care of. One commentary puts it like this: "On the younger son's return, the father treats him with a generosity far more than he has a right to expect. The older son, in contrast, seems to think proudly in terms

of "law, merit, and reward," rather than "love and graciousness."

- The older son may be representing the Pharisees who were criticizing Jesus for his inclusivity. The father, who represents the Heavenly Father, implies to the older son that his love for both sons is not dependent upon their perfection, but their willingness to return to Him with a broken heart and a humble contrite spirit.
- Teaching forgiveness and unconditional love is how most people understand the main lesson from this story. But poet Rainer Maria Rilke interpreted the parable with an even stronger focus on the father's unreciprocated love, which he said is the purest form of love and the most difficult for humans give. Rilke's *"The Departure of the Prodigal Son,"* explored the experience of The Prodigal Son as one who wanted to be free of all the family entanglements and drama.
- Another lesson in this parable is the yearning we have for home. But this parable taps into the yearning for more than just a place called home, but a yearning for a home that highlights our need to belong. That connects to the reason we encourage church membership. We all have a need to belong, to be accepted, and to be known and loved. Being a part of a positive support group improves self-esteem and fights loneliness in our fast-paced world that tends to isolate rather than embrace.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

I must say, our church is a great place to feel a sense of belonging. We also help you have a sense of purpose in your life even after retirement and the empty nest. But to give one another a sense of purpose in our belonging, we must be willing to authentically share ourselves with each other as well, no elitism, no cliques, no exclusivity. We are all One in Christ and equally loved in the sight of God. There is no hierarchy in this church; we are all equal in our church government and we are all equal with our social inclusivity, too.

Poet and philosopher, David Whyte says to feel as if you belong is one of the greatest triumphs of human existence. To cause a sense of not belonging always causes a feeling of woundedness. Many teen suicide notes include a sense of feeling shunned or bullied, misunderstood and not belonging.

Having no place where you feel like you belong is like living alone in exile among millions of people.

This is the reason why solitary confinement in prison is so psychologically cruel. Humans are created to live in community, connected to one another. Yearning for belonging is built into our DNA for survival.

Remember the quote: No man is an island? The entire quote is: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent."

The poet, John Donne also made our connection to one another clear in his famous quote: "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee."

How different would our world be if we all felt so deeply about the preventable deaths around us. If we felt so deeply, we would have banned private possession of automatic weapons in this country (like they did in New Zealand). If we deeply felt the grief and tragedy in the deaths of the fifty innocent men, women and children who were gunned down in the midst of praying, we would be moved to prevent further harm.

What does it take for us to hear the bell tolling for ourselves in all these mass shooting cases?

THE ID IN EACH OF US

In this parable Jesus meant for us to identify with the lost son because we all fall short of the glory of God. We are all lost sheep who at one time or another have gone astray from God. The lost soul who recklessly asked for his portion of his inheritance early and then spent it on shameful living rather than on honorable things was responding to the id in each one of us.

The id is the personality component made up of unconscious psychic energy that strives to satisfy basic urges, needs, and desires. According to Freud, the id, the ego and the superego are all components of our psyche, but the id operates based on the pleasure principle, which demands immediate gratification. The youngest son in this parable was allowing his id to guide him.

A final lesson to learn from this parable can be found when we look at it in context. Jesus taught these parables in response to the Pharisees publicly

proclaiming: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!”

This reaction inspires us to ask: Are we the judgmental ones in this story? Do we look down upon Jesus for loving all people equally despite the ways they have gotten lost and the major mistakes they have made in their lives?

HENRY NOUWEN

Henri Nouwen's 1992 book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, describes how Nouwen was inspired to go on his own spiritual journey after feeling deeply impacted by an encounter with Rembrandt's painting titled: The Return of the Prodigal.

Nouwen identifies personally with all three persons in the story: the younger, prodigal son; the self-righteous, resentful older son; and the deeply loving compassionate father. It is a good lesson for us all to put ourselves in the shoes of each main character in this parable, to empathize with each one and try to understand their perspectives.

And Henri Nouwen explains why he was so impacted by Rembrandt's painting of this parable. He says that Rembrandt portrays the father as the man who has transcended the ways of his children. His loneliness and anger may have been there in the beginning, but he has been transformed by suffering and tears. His anger has turned into boundless gratitude.

Nouwen says the placement of the hands in the Prodigal painting inspired him. (I like the placement of the hands on the page one art, too.) Nouwen was inspired to seriously look at his own aging hands.

And rather than despair over his own hands becoming worn and wrinkled, he realizes he was given those hands to stretch out toward all who suffer, to rest them upon the shoulders of all who come to him, and to offer the blessings that emerge from an awareness of the immensity of God's love. Amen

Benediction:

May you trust that our God understands when you feel lost and wander from God's ways.

Absolutely nothing separates you from the love of God even when you let your id be your guide.

But I pray that God helps you keep your id under control.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forevermore.

Amen



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