

Lent: Coming To Our Senses

The Parable of the Prodigal Son:

a reflection on outward and inward waywardness.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
March 6, 2016

Our Gospel Reading this morning is one of the most popular and well-known stories in the Bible. It's most often referred to as the **Parable of the Prodigal Son**. A more appropriate name may be the Parable of the Two Lost Sons, or the Parable of the Welcoming Father. It has been termed "the pearl of the parables," and "the greatest short story ever told," and has even been summarized as "the gospel within the gospel."

[Read Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32]

I am convinced that this parable is one of the most important and revealing biblical passages about the nature and character of God - and about our own human nature and character. Much of its fascination lies in its ability to resonate with life experiences of so many: rebellion, alienation, the lure of the exotic, consequences of reckless living, an experience of self-awareness and awakening, followed by reconciliation. It even includes a timeless tale of sibling rivalry.

Each of these themes deserves a full sermon. But in the context of this season of Lent, emphasizing our ongoing reflection on what it means to be on a journey of repentance and transformation, I want us to focus on the part of the story that presents **the image of coming to one's senses and returning home**. Returning home is a familiar theme in the Bible, especially as it pertains to returning home to God. The Old Testament passage that we read on Ash Wednesday from Joel 2:12-13, declares, "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart... Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

I want to be a bit cautious at this point, however, for the imagery of "returning home" is not always helpful in the context of contemporary American culture. Family structures and rites of passage to adulthood are very different from those of first century Palestine. The homecoming imagery in the Bible, intended to be a picture of acceptance and grace, may instead for some connote failure, frustration, irresponsibility, perhaps even memories of abuse. It makes me wonder, if we each had a pair of magic ruby slippers, like our friend Dorothy in Oz, would we really want to click our heels three times in order to be transported back home?

Given the potential of discomfort in going home, how appropriate or effective is it to rely on the image of a Welcoming Father to communicate the reality of God's grace? In our age of movement away from male-dominated patriarchy, this metaphor can call up hurtful, even damaging images. And for some, distancing themselves from their biological families (at least temporarily) is a necessity for their own physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

So perhaps we need to come up with **a better understanding of Jesus' image of "home."** Fill in the blank, "The ideal home is the place where [fill in the blank]." Some

answers may be that the ideal home is the place where you are free to be entirely yourself, where you are affirmed for who you are, where you are accepted without first having to pass a litmus test to see if you "fit in." Some may say home is 'the place where you can scratch where it itches', or 'the place where everybody knows your name.' Then there's the familiar, 'home is where the heart is,' **where people always care about and tend to each other's well-being.**

Perhaps another way to understand "home" is in the forming of a new family or community. We often refer to this as our "chosen family" of which the church can certainly be a part. Laura Smit, while she was the Director of Youth and Christian Education at First Presbyterian Church in Buffalo, New York, wrote an article back in 1988 for the publication *Theology Today*. Entitled "The Image of Home," she writes, "Rather than using the home-image of return to parental authority, why not call people to the creation of a new home, a new community within which hierarchies are challenged, gifts are affirmed, and responsibility is encouraged." This, I believe, is the kind of place the church is called to be. And when the church is functioning at its best, it can help live into these things. Given those criteria, how does College Hill measure up? **Are we being a community of faith that can be understood as a "home," a place where hierarchies are challenged, gifts are affirmed, and responsibility is encouraged?**

There's something important in Jesus' parable, however, that happens before there can be a return home. The prodigal son, after recklessly wasting his inheritance and falling into a terrible state physically, emotionally, and spiritually, first had to recognize the untenable hole that he had dug himself into. When he faced his reality head on, **he came to his senses.** The NRSV translation of the Bible states it as, "he came to himself." It is only then that he realized the necessity of turning his life around and returning home. **This self-awareness that the path we may be on is harmful, even destructive, along with the willingness to change direction in order to transform our lives is, in a nutshell, a wonderful characterization of the purpose of the church season of Lent. It's also the very definition of repentance.**

But here's another word of caution at this point. **David R. Henson**, in his blog on patheos.com, that I shared with you three years ago entitled, "On our Behalf: Reclaiming Repentance As a Progressive Christian" (posted February 12, 2013), clarifies the 'returning home' imagery this way:

It would be a mistake, in my mind, to think of repentance as turning around on the path, backtracking and attempting to start over at the place where we perceive everything started to go wrong. It would be a mistake to think of repenting as returning to the way things used to be. Thinking of repentance in such conservative terms misses the point. Because that's not repentance. Rather, that is nostalgia. And it's also a fiction.

Rather than calling us to go back to a simpler time, repentance beckons us further and deeper. It is progressive, rather than regressive. If we are lost, repentance isn't about pulling out a compass and searching for the original trailhead. Instead, repentance is waiting to be found and then discovering that we have been found all along. For **God is already with us in the middle of the path we're on, no matter how thorny, steep or mired it is.**

Repentance helps us to see where God already is. It helps us get past that heresy of believing God would quit loving us.

Henson rightfully reminds us that God stays with us even when we ‘travel to a distant country.’ Perhaps it is when we forget this that we head down the path of a prodigal life in the first place. Coming to our senses, therefore, can simply mean recognizing a waiting and welcoming God who is always with us and within us. **Coming to one’s senses can mean recognizing the Sacred Presence of God not only within ourselves but also within others**, within our families – biological or chosen, within our community of faith, within all of creation. Henson further reflects, as we will hear in a moment during our Candle Extinguishing Liturgy:

Repentance is the journey, the process of seeing that God has made holy the ground — whatever ground — we find ourselves on. **Seeing God where we are changes us, too.** It gives us that new mind, that new way of seeing and thinking and believing about the world that is the hallmark of true repentance.

That was the experience of the prodigal son in this parable. Unfortunately, the parable ends without knowing what the responsible, rule-following, yet ultimately self-righteous, jealous, angry and resentful older son (who remains standing out in his father’s field) will do. One biblical commentator puts it this way: **“Self-righteous, elder brother types are so preoccupied with guarding the boundaries of God’s grace they do not notice that with the very act of line-drawing they exclude themselves.”** At a later date, I’ll share how this became a reality at our Presbytery meeting just this past week. I’ll just say, it became an ‘unsafe space’ for me.

So whether your and my waywardness is external and outwardly focused, like the younger prodigal son, or internal and inwardly focused, like the older son who stayed home, the process is the same. We must first come to our senses and realize that the radical grace of God is always present and freely offered. Or, as summarized by the great **Henri Nouwen**:

God has no desire to punish wayward children. Inner and outer waywardness is its own punishment. God simply wants to let us know that the love we have searched for in such distorted ways has been, is, and always will be there for us.

Indeed, that’s why we are all on a journey of repentance and transformation.

Amen.

Resources:

Jirair Tashjian, *The Christian Resource Institute*, 2004.

Brian Stoffregen, Faith Lutheran Church, Marysville, CA; CrossMarks Christian Resources, 2004.

Kenneth E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15*, 1992.