

Chosen Exile

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
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You are about to hear what has been termed the “pearl of the parables,” the “gospel within the gospels,” even the “greatest short story ever told.” It’s most popularly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But upon closer look a more appropriate title may actually be the “Parable of the Two Lost Sons,” or the “Parable of the Welcoming Parent.” As you listen, explore how this story relates to your story; how your story relates to this story.

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

At the very beginning of this parable, we are told that the younger of two sons asks his father for his share of the inheritance. He then quickly converts his inheritance into cash, presumably by selling off his allotment of land, and leaves for a far country. So far, so good, right? Actually, no. Why? In ancient Jewish tradition, although a son was allowed to obtain possession of his inheritance *before* his father died, he had no right to dispose of it as long as the father was alive. In the culture of Jesus’ day, which was deeply sensitive to issues of honor and shame, the behavior of this son would be seen as deplorable and even unforgivable. It would most likely lead a father to disown his son. For in effect, the son’s action reveals that he wishes his father were already dead. He has deeply dishonored and shamed his father and his family.

The expectation at this early point in the story is that the father should explode with protest and anger, and perhaps with a good thrashing, at such an inappropriate and disrespectful action. Yet, he does not react as would have been culturally expected, thus the next shocking element in this story. We’re being set up. We’re being alerted to expect something surprising in our understanding of the nature and character of God – of how things are in the realm and kin-dom of God.

The younger son goes out to “a distant country,” as in dreaded Gentile territory, and squanders his inheritance in what is translated as “dissolute living.” But in fact, **the word “prodigal” simply means exceedingly wasteful, or extravagant, but not necessarily wicked or immoral. Therefore, we can’t exclude ourselves from relating to the prodigal just because we feel we are living a good and moral life.**

Without regard to future consequences, always an unwise approach to life, the younger son ends up spending all his inheritance. But it gets worse. He is further trapped by an unforeseen famine. The prodigal son ends up tending pigs for a Gentile, and becomes hungry to the point that he even longs to eat the pigs’ food. In that culture, this element of the story is meant to epitomize hitting rock bottom. And it’s the ultimate

in being 'unclean' – tending to unclean swine in and unclean Gentile land. It was the lowest of the low.

It is only at this point of complete desperation when the younger son “came to himself.” What a great phrase. In coming to his senses he realizes that somehow he has to return to his true home. How many times have we heard stories, perhaps even within our own life's journey, where it takes reaching a point of desperation, perhaps even hitting rock bottom, in order for us to **take stock of our lives, come to our senses, reverse whatever damaging course we're on, and return to God and the ways of God** – our true home? This self-awareness and 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. **Repentance: coming to our senses and changing course.**

After deciding to return home, the prodigal son expects nothing more than to be received back into the family with the lowly status of a hired hand. But the father, seeing his son from a distance, which indicates that he has been looking out for his son to return home all this time, is filled with compassion and runs out to meet his son. This, too, is highly unexpected, because in an ancient Jewish culture running to embrace someone who has shamed you is something a patriarch would never do.

So, instead of being treated as a disowned son, the prodigal is given the royal treatment, literally. A robe, a ring, and a joyous feast to celebrate. Importantly, the father does not wait for explanations or promises. **There are no questions asked of his son, only acceptance. This is how we are to see the true nature of God, as compassionate, loving, and forgiving.**

If we can describe the prodigal son as suffering from an outward waywardness, as exemplified in and through his reckless behavior, then perhaps we can describe the elder son as suffering from an inner waywardness – in and through his resentful attitude.

As the Welcome Home party is underway, we learn that the older son is on his way to the house from working in a nearby field. After speaking to one of the hired hands to figure out what all the celebrating is about, his father comes out to speak to him. This is when the elder son's true inward waywardness is revealed. He compares his relationship with his father, one marked by always trying to do the right thing, as like being a slave.

Jesus may have been drawing a comparison between the elder son's bitterness, envy, and resentment with those who approach religion and a life of faith in a legalistic, merit-based way. If that is true, the most shocking revelation in Jesus' parable is that **those who see the primary purpose of living a religious life as an exercise in following the letter of the law (as in following all the rules as they perceive them), have a difficult time recognizing and accepting God as a God of grace.**

Why, we wonder, wasn't the younger son punished? Where's the justice? Why should the disobedient one (the rebel child) get a party thrown in his honor when we dutiful, obedient types (the model child) don't get the same? Why, in other words, does God's grace, mercy, and acceptance override what we feel others, or ourselves, should get what they deserve? We learn that by definition, **mercy isn't fair.** We also learn that **resentment and joy cannot coexist.** Yet further, we learn that **God's grace doesn't follow or come after our repentance, God's grace enables and even precludes our repentance.** It all boils down to how we respond to God's grace and acceptance – of ourselves and of others.

The outwardly wayward prodigal son accepts his father's call to a restored relationship. But the bitter, resentful, and inwardly wayward son is left standing in the

field. According to this intentionally open-ended parable we don't know what he decides to do. One way to interpret this, then, is that **we do not know if he ultimately chooses genuine relationship or isolation** – continued isolation from his brother, and even isolation from his father.

Just as the younger prodigal son chose exile by leaving his home, the elder son has chosen exile while staying at home. Writes one biblical commentator, "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." Have we ever done that? Have you? I have. In the final analysis, **living a spiritual life is not so much a matter of keeping or not keeping the rules, but rather a matter of maintaining open and loving relationships: with God, with community, with family and with neighbors.**

And just in case we are prone to judge either of the two brothers, let us admit that **both live inside of us, the responsible yet resentful one, and the dishonoring and reckless one.** Or, as summarized by the great Henri Nouwen:

We leave home [chose exile] every time we deny the spiritual reality that we belong to God and that our true home is with God. We leave home every time we search outside of God to earn and win the love we so much desire.

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.

So, whether you find yourself squandering your life in a "distant country," or bitterly standing out in a field nearby, know that **God is always filled with compassion, comes out to meet you where you are, and always welcomes you home.** Because of God's extravagant – yes, prodigal – grace, there's always a Welcome Home party in full swing. The home being the realm and kin-dom of God in our midst.

Let us return from our chosen exile!

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.