

## Sermon on the Prodigal Son, March 27, 2022

I love this story. It is only found in Luke and is one of the reasons I love the Gospel of Luke. We have three characters in this story: the father and his two sons. Who do you relate to in this story? Do you relate to the younger son? The one who spent his youth and a lot of his money in pleasure seeking? Or the older son, maybe, who did everything right all his life and feels like he's been gypped because his Dad seems to care more about his worthless brother? Or perhaps you relate to the Dad, who loves his difficult kids so much?

The younger son doesn't seem to have a lot of consideration for anyone but himself. He tells his Dad he doesn't want to wait till his Dad's dead to enjoy all his inheritance. He wants it now. This is a little tactless, really. But the Dad goes along with it and gives him his share of the property, which he immediately sells and then goes off as far away from home as he can manage. And he has a good time. Wine, women, song, all the luxuries and friends that money can buy.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, for him, budgeting wasn't high on his skill set, so he runs out of money and at about the exact same time, he runs out of friends and girlfriends. And then there's a famine and he's hungry. And he ends up working in a degrading job (remember pigs were seen as unclean), and being jealous of the pigs because they had better food than he did. I think we could call this rock bottom.

And like many of us who hit rock bottom, he starts to think. He starts to realise that the stuff he was hankering after wasn't so satisfying after all. That pursuing his own pleasure with no regard to anything else, actually didn't make him as happy as he thought it would. He realises he's made a mess of his life, and possibly burnt his bridges. And he feels some pretty deep remorse. He realises he is starving, and not just for food. Eventually he "comes to himself," as Luke puts it. And he realises that his Dad would probably at least have enough affection left for him to hire him on as a labourer and he'd be better off than he is now, even if he doesn't deserve to be treated like a son any more.

So he goes back and all the way back he rehearses his speech: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son: treat me like one of your hired hands." You can imagine him saying it over and over as he plods towards home. Not sure what kind of reception he will get. Not sure if his father will hire him or just slam the door in his face. Convinced he doesn't even deserve to be hired. But hoping, hoping that his father will care that much. Have you ever been there? Getting up your courage to go back to God or someone else, hoping you won't be rejected? Thinking you might be? But going anyway, because it's better than where you are?

But of course, Dad is sitting on the porch watching the road, hoping and hoping that one day his son will come back, and when he sees him far off, he runs to meet him and catches him in his arms and hugs him before the poor boy can say anything. And when he does start on his speech, Dad cuts him off and calls the slaves to get him a bath and clean, nice clothes and a ring and to kill the fatted calf. We are going to have a party!

I wonder what effect this had on the younger son? We don't know what happens next. Did his father's loving welcome change him? Did he really have a change of heart and was he a good, responsible, caring man from then on? Or did he have relapses sometimes? Or even stay basically selfish? Did he continue to feel unworthy all his life? Or did he start to see his worth in different terms? Did he start to see that his worth didn't rest in having tons of money to throw around (as his so-called friends seem to have thought) but in his belonging to his father who loved him. I wonder how he did after his misspent youth?

I don't imagine most of us have a story quite like this, but most of us have probably had periods of our lives when we strayed from the strait and narrow, when we indulged ourselves without too much care for other people. When we lived for ourselves alone. And if so, most of us have probably discovered how unsatisfying that can be. How barren our lives can be when we have no better purpose than to please ourselves. Jesus' clear message to us is that God might be grieved by our behaviour, but God still loves us and welcomes us whenever we turn around and go back to him and try to live by more worthwhile values.

Then there's the older son. Perhaps we identify with him. He was a good boy and a good man. He always did what his father asked and always acted with consideration for him. I can only imagine his feelings when his bratty little brother asked his Dad for his share of the property. Now. Righteous indignation. And then his Dad was foolish enough to give it to him! I wonder if he felt a tiny bit of jealousy, in amongst all the anger? So he stays and works every day, uncomplainingly. And one day, at the end of a day working out in the fields, as he approaches the house, he hears the unmistakable signs of a party.

"What's going on?" he asks a slave. "Your brother has come home!" says the slave. "Your Dad has given him some nice clothes, and hired the best caterer and a great band and is throwing a party because he has him back safe and sound." This is the last straw! Dad never threw a party for him! He refuses to go in and celebrate. He is angry. Very angry. It was bad enough that Dad gave his brother his share of the property but this is adding insult to injury. He sulks out in the barn.

Dad hears about this and comes out to him and begs him to come in. "Your brother's home. Come and celebrate." The older son blows his top. "Look, I've been slaving away for you all these years, never asking anything from you, never disobeying you. And you never even gave me pizza and beer to have a party with my friends. Nothing at all. Now this worthless son of yours comes home after spending half your money on prostitutes and who knows what else, and you kill the fatted calf! Forget it! I'm not coming in to celebrate that wastrel's return. I wish he'd never come back!"

Dad says, "Son, you are always with me. You are my mainstay and I love you. Everything I have left is yours. Have you never realised that? [Actually, I don't think he has ever realised it. He thinks he has nothing]. This is all yours. But I have to be happy seeing your brother again. It's like he was dead and has come to life. He was lost and now I've found him again."

But Jesus doesn't tell us if he goes in or not. I wonder.

I wonder how many of us can relate to this? Do we ever feel a tiny bit of jealousy for those people who seem to have it all? Who seem to go through life making the wrong decisions and still things turn out for them? When we've been careful and good all our lives and it never seemed to be much of a party for us? Have we ever felt that we deserved better treatment than we got? Do we realise what assets and blessings we actually have, or do we think we're poor? Or feel that our goodness deserved some kind of better reward from God? Recently I've heard people say that if God loves Vladimir Putin and if he or Hitler or any of those bad people ever makes it to heaven, then they don't want to be there. They don't want those people to be forgiven by God, even if they repent. Or loved by God. Can we relate to this? Will we stay out in the barn sulking? Or go in and dance at the party?

Then there's the father. Or maybe mother, in some of our cases. Perhaps some of us relate to the father, with a couple difficult children. Bending over backwards to be kind to them, even giving them far more than we probably should. When they turn out badly or go away from us, waiting and hoping and longing for their return. So glad when they do return, if they do. Then having to deal with the other kid, who thinks they don't deserve to be welcomed back to the home, or perhaps the church. As parents and grandparents, perhaps we can relate to this. Perhaps we have been hurt by our children or our grandchildren and yet we know that we still love them so much, still long for them, still desire their happiness and well-being. And desire them to get along with each other.

The father in this story never coerces his sons. He gives them the freedom to do as they choose. Now, if I were the mother and one of my kids asked for their inheritance right now, instead of waiting till I was dead, I would say no. Especially if I had a good idea of what use it would be put to. But this father doesn't. He gives them all the blessings of life and the freedom to do whatever they want with it. I bet he'd have turned over the half of the property to the other son if he asked, too. One son wastes his. The other doesn't even seem to know he has it and resents that. But there is no coercion. He lets them make their own decisions. Because ultimately, if you want people to love you, they have to be allowed to do it freely or it isn't love.

Who do you most relate to? Jesus clearly intended the father in this story to stand for God, although many of us might relate more to him than to the sons. This parable is in a group with the lost sheep and the lost coin, where the shepherd and the woman go hunting for the one they've lost and he says there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who don't need to repent. Jesus is clear that God welcomes us, no matter what we've done, sinners and righteous (though in this story both have sinned, but in different ways). He loves them both and wants them both. And wants them to love each other, too. Something to remember in the church as well.

God also loves us, each one of us, no matter where we are in life, no matter what we've done. God will always welcome us to his party, where he provides feasting and dancing, love and joy. It's up to us whether we want to go or not. This Lent, let's take a look at our lives and see what it is that might be preventing us from accepting Jesus' invitation to a rich, full, joyful life. And let's come to ourselves and abandon whatever is getting in the way, and go in to the Father and accept his love and return it and share it.