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“Prodigals”

Joshua 5:9-12 Luke 15:1-3; 11-32 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 15:1-3;11-32

Jesus told stories. Those of us in the church have a spiritual name for them. We call them parables. They're stories that Jesus told to give people insight into the Kingdom of heaven. One of Jesus' best known stories is found in Luke 15:11-24. Would you please stand to hear the word of the Lord from the gospel of Luke 15:1-3; and 11-24.

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The Sunday School teacher was reading this morning's story to his class, clearly emphasizing the resentment the older brother expressed at the return of his brother. When he was finished telling the story, he asked the class, "Now who was really sad that the younger son had come home?" After a few minutes of silence, one little boy raised his hand and confidently stated, "The fatted calf."

I don't know if you noticed or not, but Jesus never uses the word "prodigal" in the telling of the story. Through the years this adjective has been tacked on to the younger son. The word "prodigal" is an adjective that means "to squander or to be recklessly extravagant." *The younger son was recklessly extravagant with his inheritance.*

According to the custom of that day, the eldest son would always get a double portion of the estate. When the younger son came to his father and asked him to give him the portion that was coming to him, he was essentially asking for his share of the estate that would come to him upon the death of his father. What the impatient younger brother is saying to his father is, "I can't wait around long enough for you to die. I want mine now!" This son is the poster child for selfishness. He got what he wanted and headed to the far country.

In this far country, being a stranger and far away from the friends he has known all his life, the only companionship he had was what money could buy. As long as there was money to spend, there were people there to help him spend it. When it was gone, and the son went to look for a job, it was a time of famine. Here was a former farmer looking for work in a foreign country that could grow no crops.

At his wits end and driven by hunger, the son accepted the most humiliating and repulsive form of labor for a good Jewish boy--a swine slopper. When he became so hungry that he began to fancy the slop, he knew he was in trouble. That's when he "came to himself."

This is the pivotal verse of the passage. The word Jesus used here is a medical term used to describe someone coming to his or her senses after fainting. The slop served as his "smelling salts", and he finally "came to."

What is most important to notice about the prodigal's realization is that in that very moment he repents of the sin done to God and to his father. He is sorry for his sin. Sure, he doesn't like the situation he is in, but the situation has served to help him realize his sin. Sometimes it's good for bad things to happen, because bad things have a way of getting our attention.

Sometimes when we fall it brings us to our senses. Some times people have to get to the bottom before they will look up. When things are going great we have no need for God.

While it was sin that led the son to leave the father, it is the CONSEQUENCE of his sin that drove him back. It's not enough to be sorry. He had to risk rejection, to risk returning. He now is the poster boy for repentance.

The first step on the road back to God is not easy. It requires being humble enough to admit that we have blown it. I saw a sign this week that said, Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less. The younger son's "coming to" was not merely the recognition of his miserable circumstances, or that his daddy's servants were better off. He now becomes the poster boy for self-examination. He began to see the truth about himself.

Notice as the son rehearses his speech his first confession is to God. There are no excuses. He doesn't try to pass the blame on bad luck, bad investments or bad choice of friends. He fully shoulders the blame and is willing to suffer the consequences from God and from his father. He arose and went home.

When he does return he can't get out all the words of his repentance speech before he is lavished with love from his father with hugs and kisses and a robe and a ring and shoes. That's because the youngest son *wasn't* the only prodigal in the story. The father was prodigal. The father was as recklessly extravagant with his forgiveness as the son was with his inheritance. The father wouldn't stop giving, even in the face of rejection. He held no grudge. He was filled with sheer joy to see once again the son he loved enough to let go. He let him go because to have him of his own free will was far better than having him against his will.

That's the real point of Jesus' parable. No one is a hopeless case. No one is so far gone that he or she can't come back home again. No situation is so dark that it cannot be used as "swine slop smelling salts" to bring those in the far country to their senses. There is no such thing as "sweet smelling salts". To do their job, smelling salts have to stink! Sometimes the loving father meets those who have "come to" by sending one of us to them.

*In his marvelous book, The Kingdom of God is a Party, Tony Campolo tells a story that illustrates how I believe the church must live out our witness. Campolo was attending a Christian conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. Since there was a six-*

hour time differential between Honolulu and his hometown in Pennsylvania, on his first night there Campolo experienced some confusion in his sleep pattern. He woke up about 3 o'clock in the morning and couldn't get back to sleep. So he got up, got dressed, and left the hotel where he was staying, searching for a place to get something to eat. Eventually he found a tiny coffee shop that was open. Here is his description of what happened there:

*"The fat guy behind the counter came over and asked me what I wanted. I told him I wanted a cup of coffee and a donut. As I sat there munching my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door suddenly opened, swung wide, and to my discomfort in marched 8 or 9 provocatively dressed and rather boisterous prostitutes. It was a small place and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was garrulous, loud, and crude. I felt completely out of place. I was just about to make my getaway when I heard the woman next to me say, 'You know, tomorrow is my birthday. I'm going to be 39.' Her friend responded in a rather nasty tone, 'So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? You want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?' 'Come on,' the woman sitting next to me said, 'why do you have to be so mean? I'm just telling you that it's my birthday. Why do you have to put me down? I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?'*

*Campolo says, "When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women left, and then I called over to the fat guy behind the counter and asked him, 'Do they come in here every night?' He answered, 'Yeah.' 'The one who was sitting right next to me, does she come in every night?' 'Yeah,' he said, 'that's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in every night. Why do you want to know?' 'Because,' I replied, 'I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you say we do something special for her? What do you think about throwing a birthday party for her right here in the coffee shop?' A cute kind of smile crept over that fat man's chubby cheeks. 'That's a great idea,' he said. 'I like it. That's great. Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind. I don't think anybody has ever done anything nice and kind for her.'*

*'Well, look,' I told him, 'if it's okay with you, I'll be back here tomorrow morning at 2:30. I'll decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake for her,' 'No way!' he replied. 'The birthday cake, that's my thing. I'll bake the birthday cake myself.'*

*"At two thirty the next morning," Campolo says, "I was back at that coffee shop. I picked up some crepe paper and other decorations at the store, and made a sign of big pieces of cardboard that said 'Happy Birthday, Agnes!' I decorated that diner from one end to the other. I had it really looking great. The word must have gotten out on the street, because by 3:15 that morning every prostitute in Honolulu was in that place. There was wall-to-wall prostitutes – and me. At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready... When they came in we all jumped up and screamed, 'Happy Birthday, Agnes!' Then we sang to her. And you know, I've never seen a*

*person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open, her knees started to buckle, her friend had to offer her arm to steady her, and I noticed she had started to cry. When the birthday cake with all the candles was carried out, that's when she lost it. She started sobbing. Harry, the fat guy behind the counter, gruffly mumbled, 'Blow out the candles, Agnes, blow out the candles.' Then he handed her a knife and said, 'Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake.'*

*Agnes looked down at that cake, and without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, 'Look, Harry, is it okay with you if I, I mean, if I don't, what I want to ask, is it okay if I keep the cake for a little while? Is it okay if we don't eat it right away?' Harry shrugged and answered, 'Well, sure, Agnes, that's fine. You want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home if you want to.' 'Oh, could I?' she asked. Looking at me, she said, 'I just live down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home, okay? I'll be right back, honest.' She got off her stool, she picked up that cake, and she carried it out of the diner like it was the Holy Grail. She walked slowly toward the door, and we all just stood there, speechless. When the door closed behind her, there was stunned silence in the place.*

*Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, 'What do you say we pray together?' Looking back on it now, it seems more than a little strange that a sociologist from eastern PA would be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But I prayed. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her. And when I finished, Harry leaned over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, 'Hey, you never told me you were a preacher! What kind of preacher are you anyway? What church do you belong to?'*

*In one of those moments when just the right words come, I answered him quietly, 'I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.' Harry thought for a minute, and then almost sneered as he answered, 'No you don't! There is no church like that. In fact,' he concluded, 'if there was, I'd join it.'"*

*Maybe Harry was right. Maybe there is no church that is open enough to the leading of the Holy Spirit to be that kind of church. But if the church is to continue to provide a witness to the world about the unconditional love of God that's the kind of church we're going to have to become. 1*

We read the first 3 verses of this chapter to see that this story was one of three stories that were told to Jesus' opposition. Jesus tells this story to make them realize that they are just as bad off as being knee deep in swine slop. They are just as lost and God is the loving father who loves them too. God loves them AND the tax collectors and the outcasts, and wants to forgive all of them and is ready to run to meet any of them when they are ready. To make his point, Jesus adds an epilogue encounter between the older brother and the father. The loving

father wasn't through going to meet sons that day.

The older son represents those we call "good." He reacts the way many good folks tend to react. He is jealous and bitter about his Dad's mercy. It is evident that his devotion to his father has been motivated in part, by self-interest. Because he is self-centered, he cannot forgive and forget the sin of his younger brother. He even disowns his brother when he says, "This son of yours." Did you notice that in the father's response the father says, "This brother of yours"?

I wish I had a story of theologians who hadn't had a birthday party either, but I don't. I have been on a prison ministry weekend at the Carol Vance Unit in Sugarland when we provided birthday cakes for inmates and sang to them and seen grown men tear up because they have never had a birthday cake before.

No far country is too far for God. No back forty is too far for God. We once were lost, but now we're found. Today far more than younger sons run away. There are run away daughters and mothers and fathers. Whatever your relationship with your earthly parents, don't make the mistake of letting their treatment of you keep you away from the God who does loves you so much. Don't let the disappointment of earthly parents keep you from knowing the love of your heavenly parent.

In reality, no earthly father is as forgiving as the father of Jesus' parable. Only God is that forgiving. And that's precisely the point of the story. Jesus isn't telling this story to comfort and encourage his hearers that if they just pray their sons will come home again. He is saying that we, we are sometimes like that youngest son, and God is the father willing to let us go but also RUNNING to welcome us home. We are sometimes like that resentful older son that refused to forgive and is missing out on the party.

Some of us were lost because we willfully defied God and left for the far country because we couldn't wait to have our way and have our fun. Some of us never left and were still lost, even though we couldn't dream of thinking that we were.

If you know someone who is lost, pray for them. Pray that they will come to their senses and return to the Lord. If you dare, pray that some dramatic circumstance will be their smelling salts to make them come to too!

Maybe the someone who is lost is you. Pray to the Lord. Come to! Turn around! Head home! The Lord is ready to run to meet you more than half way. The Lord is ready to coax you out of your pout. Join the party! Whether you return from the far country like the younger brother or from the back forty like the older one, God is ready to be prodigally extravagant with grace and mercy. The robes and rings and shoes are ready...Our prodigal God throws parties for ... prodigals.