

*“The Return of the Prodigal Son”*

*Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32*

*March 10, 2013*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

*The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

Today’s message is based on a trilogy of inspiration: the Biblical story in Luke 15; Henri Nouwen’s book The Return of the Prodigal Son; and Rembrandt’s 1766 painting “Return of the Prodigal Son,” which is the basis of Nouwen’s book. The enclosed postcard-sized print of the painting is my gift to you; and I want to thank our Interim Administrative Assistant, Mary Lou Kampert, for arranging for its printing.

What is it about this story of the prodigal son that at once compels and repels us? And why “prodigal,” which is not used in the Bible text? The word, which means “extravagant,” has been used to focus the story on the dissolute son and the debauchery by which he spends his father’s inheritance. But the father, too, is extravagant in love as he welcomes his wayward son home.

The story, appearing only in Luke, is the last of three stories that Jesus tells about the unstoppable love of God. Yes, it’s a story about coming to your senses. Yes, it’s a story that declares you can come home again. Yes, it’s a story about forgiveness, both asked for and given; and how hard it is to do both. But most of all it is about the unstoppable love of God.

As he often does, Jesus uses the practical imperative of losing something of economic value to draw his listeners in. Each of the three stories in Luke 15 reflect losing and finding something of increasing economic value: first a sheep, which could be sold and bartered; then a coin, rare even in Biblical times and valuable because of its ability to hold value when bartered goods might not; and a son, valuable not only as a matter of the heart but as a matter of economic survival. Then, even more than now, children were their elder’s social security.

The story appears simple and is, to most of us, familiar. A father had two sons. The younger asked for his share of the inheritance. The father agreed and divided his property between the sons. Shortly thereafter the younger son left with his share, squandered it away, devolved into poverty, and came to his senses only when he realized he wished he could eat what pigs eat.

He decided to go home and ask his father's forgiveness. He practiced his speech to ask his father to take him back as a hired hand. The father, seeing the son from a long way off, rejoiced that the son he thought was dead was alive. The father threw the party to end all parties, much to the consternation of the older brother who had done the right thing all along. The older son refuses to go to the party. The father seeks him out, hoping to soften his hardened heart with the final entreaty: "*this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.*"

Yet the simplicity of the narrative belies its complexity. Like life, this story is not as simple as it seems. In my experience this story compels some of the strongest reactions from people of any that Jesus told. Much of that reaction is in the form of questions that the narrative either does not answer, or directly answer:

*Why would the father divide the inheritance prior to his death?*

*Where is the mother in the story?*

*What kind of father could take back that kind of son?*

*Why not take the younger son back on the terms he offered—as a hired hand—instead of throwing a huge party?*

*What kind of brother could be so callous toward his wayward younger brother?*

So as we unpack the complexity of this story, remember its primary purpose: to describe the yearning of God to seek and save the lost with a love that never lets go!

Let's start with the younger son. For whatever reason he is self-absorbed. To ask for his inheritance prior to his father's death was tantamount to wishing for his father to be dead! Just think of the audacity today that any of us should presume to ask our parents for "our share of the inheritance." As a side note, the inheritance he received was not half of his father's estate. As was the custom of the time, he received half the amount of his elder brother.

Having gotten his material goods, he does what immature people often do: he squanders them. He does so in a foreign country, far from the constraints of custom and far from any place where he might have to worry that a voice might say "Aren't you so-and-so's son?" Better to remain anonymous in the depravity. The problem is: the farther we run from God, the less able we are to hear the voice that calls us "beloved;" the more we become ensnared in those illusions that we think bring us life, but only bring death. The younger son became a foreigner: to his family, to those around him, and to himself.

He "comes to his senses" when he realizes that his father would provide him, even if he were a slave, basic necessities that he does not have in this foreign land. He proposes in his mind that if he was a slave, perhaps his father will take him back. Manipulative? Could be. Wouldn't be the first kid to do that, would he? Nor the last. But so what? And there was a risk. The father could well have said, "You are dead to me." In any event, we cannot know the younger son's heart. We only know his action, consistent penitence, even if he did bank on dad's kindness.

And dad was kind. The lavish homecoming is represented in the symbols of the son's welcome. A robe was the sign of the ruler. Look now at the Rembrandt painting and see both the father and the older son in such a robe, reddish orange in your reproduction and darker red in the original. The son was given a ring, a sign of authority. The sandals were a sign that he was not a slave, for slaves were unshod. All are signs of the son's welcome.

We sometimes ask “*What kind of father would give everything to his sons, without condition, without respect to their maturity or ability to ‘handle it?’*” Yet is that not just exactly what God has done? We are the beneficiary of so many gifts, yet hoard them as private treasure; we often spend them without regard for neighbor; in the world community we are sinfully rich even while we sometimes think of ourselves as terribly deprived!

This sense of deprivation is, ironically, where we meet the elder son, a deprivation borne of isolation. You can hear it in his lament, “*All these years I have been working like a slave for you...yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends...*” Look again at Rembrandt: there is much that ties the elder son to his father: the bearded face, the rich red cloak, and the lighted features of the face.

But there is much that separates as well. The father is bent toward the younger son, but the brother stands apart, erect and away. The father’s cloak is broad and open; the elder son’s narrow and flat. The father’s hands are open in embrace; the elder son’s clasped and closed. The father models loving forgiveness’ the elder son a self-centered complacency that not only denies love but cannot understand it.

The elder son is without joy, carrying only resentment: “*look at all I did for you*” is his sentiment. He has forgotten that “*righteousness is its own reward.*” To those who resent the younger brother for getting away with something, the text says this: you can have the life of the younger brother if you wish. Living away from the love of family and friends, impoverished, eating what pigs eat. If you desire that, by all means choose it. The elder brother has forgotten that he has that choice; and that joy, as well as duty, comes with faithfulness to our dear ones.

This is where we return to the father, for the father seeks to remind the elder son just how dearly he loves him: every bit as much as the younger son. In the Greek New Testament, the father

addresses the elder son as “*teknon*,” literally translated “*my dear son*.” (vs. 31) He wants his son to come in to the party not only to celebrate that “*this brother of yours*” was lost and is found, but that the elder brother might know joy.

Where are we in the story? Fr. Nouwen observes that we are everywhere in the parable: the dutiful, obedient son, even to the point of resentment and “cutting off” our own; the dissolute son, wholly self-absorbed; and the father. God the father continues to love us and beckon us home; and to cultivate that father in us is our ultimate vocation: to become: compassionate, loving, welcoming.