

Trouble with Kids, Part 2
Luke 15:1-2, 11-32
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August 20, 2017

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."...

¹¹Then Jesus^[b] said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with^[c] the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'^[d] ²²But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father

has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹Then the father^[e] said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

There are many artistic interpretations of biblical stories and themes. Briefly let's look at one representation. It was painted near the end of his life by Rembrandt, titled "The Return of the Prodigal".

There is much to notice ...

There are more than three figures in the painting but the father and both sons are highlighted.

Focus first on the younger son:

His clothing is tattered and torn, his sandals falling apart, revealing his bruised and blistered feet. He is kneeling, leaning upon his father's chest, held close in his embrace.

Father: nearly blind...notice his hands...if we could see the detail we would notice that his left hand appears more masculine than the right...

Elder son: Stands aloof, apart. His body language says: No. I cannot sanction this reunion, the last thing I'll do is join in this welcome home party!

As to the other more prominent figure in the frame: who is he, a servant?

And in the shadows, another figure appears...perhaps the mother?

You might want to look at this painting more closely online. The original hangs in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. Henri Nowen, a Jesuit priest has written a book on his reflections on this scripture and this particular painting. I commend it to you.

Last week we heard from each of these sons; today we hear from the dad.

Father:

Ah...time goes by so quickly! I remember well when my boys were small:

How their hands fit so easily into mine as we walked together...

How excited they would get when their cousins came to visit...

The joy that came from watching them play, and learn, and grow.

To love one's children is to know that one must let them go, set them free to make their own choices, even choices I may disagree with. So very many times I have wanted to talk with them..to warn them of the consequences of various choices, to convince them that at home can be found everything that they search for elsewhere. How much I would have liked to prevent them from leaving, to keep them close and protect them from all harm.

But to love is to set free: love cannot be coerced or bargained for (a quid pro quo: "you do this for me, and I'll do that for you". No deal. That's conditional. Love does not work that way.) I choose to love, no strings attached. Such love cannot forced or coerced—otherwise, it is NOT love!

To love in such a way—freely, means that -- it allows for the possibility that the children may leave home, go to "a distant country", and possibly meet with disaster. It involves freedom—freedom to reject the love offered, as well as the freedom to receive and reciprocate love.

In other words...sometimes love's heart, the parent's heart, is broken...

I was so very sad when my younger son asked for his inheritance and took off. It broke my heart. But I still had hope...hope that he would return...hope that we could be reconciled.

Love waits patiently...many times a day I would scan the horizon, searching for any sign of him. You think Motel 6 originated the saying "I'll leave the light on for you"? Not so. It was me! Day and night I was on the look-out...when I finally saw him approaching, I could hardly believe my eyes!

I could see that he was changed...and my heart went out to him. I ran, yes I ran to meet him. That in itself, was scandalous! Dignified men such as myself would not be so crass as to lift our robes to avoid tripping, revealing our legs, and run--unheard of! But in that moment, my heart won out over propriety, I was so overwhelmed with love.

There were no guarantees that I'd ever see him again—so to be reunited? It was as if he had died, and now was alive again! A miracle! My joy could not be contained. My next impulse? To reaffirm my son's place in the family—the robe, ring, and sandals—those express this in a way words alone cannot. The feasting, music and dancing? What better way to celebrate his return?!

But not everyone rejoices in his return. My eldest remains outside...angry, resentful...resisting the pull of the party...unable to enter in.

He cannot enter into the house, which represents the family.

He cannot enter into the celebrating, from which he feels excluded.

He cannot enter into my love—which has remained constant for him from the day of his birth.

He is as lost to me as the younger son once was...

No amount of reassurance, can overcome his resistance.

I plead with him, he is resolute.

My heart breaks over this son who cannot enter into my love...my home...my family.

Will he ever be able to enter in? Only time will tell...

I discovered that the dictionary definition of "prodigal" is as follows:

1. : characterized by profuse or wasteful expenditure : LAVISH
2. : yielding abundantly : LUXURIANT

So perhaps the *real* prodigal in the story is neither son, but the father who lavishes his love upon both of them, even when they are undeserving.

It is commonly understood that in this series of parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son(s), that the shepherd, the woman, and the father all are images that represent God.

If this is indeed the case, and if, this definition of "prodigal" is accurate, we see the one who is most "wasteful", most lavish in his love and luxuriant in unmerited grace is the Father! Perhaps this would be better understood as the story of the prodigal father!

Recall the setting—Jesus’ original listeners included those in two groups—the “tax collectors and sinners” and the “scribes and Pharisees”. The first group represented those who were ‘outsiders’ to the religious establishment, the second group, were the ‘insiders’.

Last week we considered the following questions:

The younger son...is his repentance sincere or selfish? What is his motivation?

The elder son is obedient, but...how long did he suffer in silence, with resentment and bitterness building inside of him?

While he remained at home physically, did he leave home/father in other ways?

Which of these two sons is lost? The younger or the elder? Are both of them lost—each in his own way?? Which of the two do you think the tax collectors and sinners identified with? And the scribes and Pharisees? Which one did you identify with?

Today we consider a few more:

Jesus has purposely left the story unfinished, open-ended.

Did the elder son yield to his father’s persuasion, welcome his brother, and join in the party?

Was the elder son able to confess that he was no better than his brother, and that he too needed to be reconciled with his father?

Did he finally enter into his father’s embrace?

Did he sit down with them at table and enjoy the festivities?

Did the younger son live into this renewed relationship?

Did he reconcile with his brother?

We are left to ponder these questions.

Of this we can be assured: The heart of the father is always filled with unconditional love and grace. There is nothing we can do that will make God love us less; there is nothing we can do that will make God love us more.

God is ready and willing to receive us with open arms, and lavish us with his mercy, love, and grace. No matter the one with whom you identify, will you come home and be received into God’s loving embrace? What will you decide?

