

I Want to Make It On My Own

From the sermon series: God's Prodigal Love

Text: Luke 15: 13

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...The younger son turned the whole of his share into cash and left home for a distant country... Luke 15: 13

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is misnamed. It is really a parable, not about a prodigal son, but about the prodigal love of God. If there is anything prodigal in the story, it is the love of God, the love of the Father, the love of God as reflected in the behaviour of the father in the story. We call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and one would be fighting a losing battle to try to rename it, I suppose, but I think the series title that we embark on this morning does reflect more accurately the nature of the parable. It really is a parable about God's love, about the nature of God, about the manner in which God relates to us - far more important than the action of the son.

The parable was told by Jesus in the first place in order to defend his own behaviour as a reflection of the behaviour of God, or the attitude and spirit of God. In reading those first verses of Luke 15, one finds that the story was addressed to the scribes and the Pharisees, the uptight, upright who were condemning Jesus for his associations. In the Gospels we don't really get a fair picture of the Pharisees, and that is because we get this overagainstness, this adversarial relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees. But we do see the contrast, even if it is only given in that one-sided fashion in the Gospels. Nevertheless, the Pharisees, who were the strict, separated ones, believed it necessary to disassociate themselves from people who were considered ritually unclean. They called everybody that was not one of their own sect a sinner. Non-Jewish people were sinners; Jewish people who were engaged in some kind of employment whereby they could not maintain their ritual purity were sinners. And so, they very quickly wrote off everybody that was other than they were as sinners. Publicans, tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes - whatever the designation may be, there was a kind of general categorization of all of those who were other

than the Pharisees. And the Pharisee would have nothing to do with the likes of sinners. And so they were condemning Jesus who was open to all, available to all, accessible to everyone, and, as a sign of his accessibility, would have table fellowship with such people. The Dutch New Testament scholar, Edward Schillebeekx, says that the most fundamental characteristic of Jesus in the Gospels is his table fellowship. That which speaks most loudly about who Jesus was are the narratives about his table fellowship. In that context, to break bread with someone was not only to extend friendship, but was to embrace that person. It was the most intimate sign of acceptance and the offering of fellowship to another.

Now, it is still, to a certain extent, true for us as well. To have a meal together is a sign of friendship and is a method by which we share intimacy. But it was especially true then. And so, Jesus, being open to all and accessible to all and breaking bread with any, no matter where they were coming from, no matter what their history, no matter what their present circumstance, no matter what their status in society – that openness got him criticism and got him written off in the minds of the Pharisees. And to defend his action and to say that his action was such because God is that way was the purpose of this parable. And so, he told the story of the father who had two sons. One was a rebel who wanted his inheritance and who took off into the far country, only finally to come to himself and to come back. The other was uptight, upright, a model of the Pharisees to whom the parable was spoken, who did everything right, dotted every i, crossed every t, followed every command and lived in total subservience. But the interesting thing about both brothers was that both of them failed to be the one thing the father wanted them to be, and that was to be in relationship of love and trust. It is possible to go into the far country and to kick over the traces and to be a total rebel and live out of relationship with the father. And it is possible, as well, to stay in the father's house and to dot every i and cross every t, follow every prescription, and use all of that righteousness and all of that rightness as an insulation also against the father, against the relationship of love and trust.

What Jesus lived out was a relationship of spontaneity and a freedom that was characterized by love and trust. When he opened himself up to people, he was a reflection of the Father Who opened Himself up to all people, Who did not ask about one's history or where one was coming from, did not ask about the state of one's morality or the degree of one's righteousness, but simply said, "Come on, and let me embrace you. Let me love you. Let my grace make you new." The Father's heart was reflected in the action of Jesus who was open to all kinds of people. He spoke to the Pharisees who were mirrored in the elder brother, who in the father's house was as far from the father as the younger son who went into the far country.

This morning I want to focus on the younger son. I have said already that the parable is about the father's prodigal love, but I have to admit that the perspective from which we are going to be looking at that is through the eyes of

the younger son, particularly. And so, this morning we are going to look at that young rebel as he looks at the father and he says in the depths of his being, as well as expressly to the father's face, "I want to do it on my own. I want to do it on my own."

The younger son was a rebel. No, better, the younger son was simply human, and in this story Jesus painted that which lives in the heart of every human being. There is that in all of us that says, "I want to do it on my own." In fact, I want to suggest to you that probably within the skin of all of us live both the rebel and the elder brother. Probably there are not only two kinds of people, but most of us live with a kind of civil war going on most of the time. Most of us have within us both the rebel that wants to break out of bounds and the self-righteous Pharisee that condemns with a cold kind of legalism. And those two sides within ourselves live there with some kind of cold war going on and sometimes an act of rebellion against each other. We can find both of those sons within ourselves, and we can find people who reflect more the one or the other. But what Jesus was talking about was something that is intrinsic to our human nature, and this morning let us simply recognize that there is something within all of us that says, "I want to do it on my own."

The thing that the youngest son failed to understand was that what he was seeking was not freedom, but autonomy. Now, God wants us to be free. Freedom is God's gift, and His intention for His people. But what we want, thinking that it is freedom, is really autonomy, and autonomy is to live as a law unto one's self. It comes from two Greek words which mean a self-law, and there is something in every human breast, I believe, that would desire to be a law unto oneself, to be autonomous, which is something other than freedom. Freedom is life in community, lived in responsible trust and love. Freedom is that ability to become fully actualized with the potential which God has created in us, but always in the parameters that have been set for us in the creative intention of God. Freedom is the ability to come to full expression by becoming what God intended us to be. Autonomy is that drive within us that says, "Don't let anybody tell me anything" (God, parents, husband, wife, child, government, whatever). "I'll take on the whole world. I will finally do it on my own." I think that until we come to recognize that some of that lives within us, we'll not fully own up to who we are. If it is true that within us live these two persons, the self-righteous Pharisee and the wild rebel, then, until we come to accept that about ourselves, we'll not really be truly healthy or spiritually whole.

If we read a little bit in the field of psychology, we are told that we have to learn to accept our shadow side. That is, there is a dark streak in all of us we need to accept because it is a part of us. You see, the Pharisee gave to the world an exterior of total righteousness. But he lived behind a mask, because that external obedience to an external code, which could only be pulled off with a tremendous expenditure of energy, was not the real person. And if the Pharisee who lived with that total righteous mask, always on guard, always putting up a front, always

putting the best foot forward, didn't recognize that that was a facade and not the person, that within the person there was also the rebel, there was also this other person who was living quite differently according to his own compulsions and that which compelled him and drove him on – if the Pharisee didn't realize that, then he never came fully to be conscious of his total humanity.

The rebel lives in us all, and if we have been so conditioned, so bound, if we have been so programmed that the rebel has never come to our consciousness and found expression in our life, then there's a whole part of us that we've never owned or reckoned with that someday could explode with great consequences. Within us all is that drive for autonomy that says, "Get off my back." (God, government, husband, wife, parents.) "Get off my back; I'll do it on my own!" And the best way to find it come to expression is to just push and probe a little bit and to see that welling up within, because there is that within us with which we have been created that wants to actualize itself.

Now, in the story, the father doesn't fight that at all. The father simply goes to the safe and gets out the money, gives the boy the wallet and sends him on his way. And Jesus was saying something about God and about human nature. We understand what he was saying, because we have all lived through it ourselves. He purposely uses a father and two sons as a reflection of God and His children because he knows that that is exactly where we all live. And we've all been children. We've all moved through those dangerous, perilous years of adolescence. We've all felt the urge to break out and the constraint to hold it in. And if we are parents, we know that our families are so structured that we can hold the children in. And when the crisis comes, and you come to me and tell me about your son or your daughter, I can be quite objective. You can be at your wit's end, and I can smile in quite a relaxed fashion and say, "Look, she's only human. Look, give him a break. Look, you've baptized the kid. Trust God and give him a little room. Let them experiment a bit. Let them feel who they are." But, don't suggest that to me when it's my son or daughter, because then I get very worried, because they might be like I was, and I do want room for myself, but I don't want room for those I love because I know how deeply they can be hurt.

I mean, this story ends rather nicely - the boy comes home. But what if the boy had been knifed in a brothel? Or what if he used his possessions in order to somehow or other engineer some plot to explode the world? We say, "Nice going, Father, you let the boy go and he came back." But what if he hadn't come back? And they don't always come back. Then we would say, "What a silly father! Why did you do it? Why did you let him go?" The father would say, "I had to let him go, because what I'm after, finally, is not an automaton, not a kind of puppet that responds to the pull of a string. I am for creating a child who loves spontaneously and trusts and lives in relationship."

And that's the problem, isn't it? Even God has limited His power in order to exercise that kind of love, extending that kind of freedom in the cause of allowing

us to develop into fully human beings. It's a risky business, and God took the risk. In families, we do what we can to build a hedgerow to keep them going down the center of the road, somehow, not deviating too far to the right or to the left. If we do that in the family, we do that in the Church, too. The Church is an institution which is dedicated to the binding of human freedom. Why do many of the best people leave the Church? The most courageous spirits take off. Because, what do we do in the Church? We develop a ritual. We say we've got to worship this way. We develop a theology, and we say, "This is your dogma." And we develop rules of conduct and we say, "You're in or you're out, depending on whether you toe the line, dot the i, cross the t." The Church is institutionalized and becomes a great conservative force in society. There are people that don't believe in anything, but believe there ought to be a church because that keeps people in line. It is an anchor against the rebel in us all. And, of course, in government and society as a whole, we're always trying to program in order to hold that human rebel in check. And God delivers us to our freedom, stands lovingly in fear and trembling, looking to see if we'll come home.

"I want to do it on my own. I want to do it on my own. Get off my back! Give me space; give me room. Let me breathe! Let me live! Let me be!"

We say this until we find that that kind of autonomy leads to terrible anxiety and a bondage which we could never dream of. And then, thank God, there are those who come to themselves and come home, only to find that the real freedom they were seeking has been there all the time extended to them in the embrace of the Father, who just says, "Oh, good! You're home at last!"

Jesus went about touching human beings, associating with them, eating with them, breaking bread, fellowshiping with them, hugging them, loving them, encouraging them, picking them up - the kind of people that the pure and the righteous really have little time for and no regard for and no hope for. And Jesus said, "You've got it all wrong. God is up there just waiting until you get it out of your system. And then when you're ready, He'll put His arms around you and say, 'Come home and find the freedom that you always thought you could find out of my presence.'"

"I want to do it on my own."

I suppose that there is a kind of once-for-all coming to God through Jesus Christ. There is a kind of once-for-all yielding up our arms, laying down our weapons, coming to the Father through Jesus, the Son. But I suspect that it is probably something we have to keep doing again and again, as well, because we can get way off in the far country, fall back into that old temptation to autonomy and doing it our own way, and all of a sudden wake up and say, "Gosh, I'm a long ways from home." And whether it's that once-for-all commitment, or just coming back again, the beautiful invitation is the Father standing there with open arms saying, "Who are you fighting? What are you running from? Why don't you just come home and let me love you?"