

I Wish I Could Start Over

From the sermon series: God's Prodigal Love

Text: Luke 15: 17

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The parable of "The Prodigal Son" is probably the most familiar and best loved of Jesus' parables. Strange, then, that it should have become known as a story about a son when, in reality, it is a story told to portray the nature of God in His relationship to us. There is prodigality in the story, but it is the prodigality of God's love. "Prodigal" is defined as "given to extravagant expenditure," "recklessly wasteful," "lavish." That sounds like God's love, which comes to expression so powerfully in this compelling story.

The story was told to "The Pharisees and the doctors of the Law." They had been grumbling at Jesus' behaviour; he extended fellowship to "sinners." He opened himself up to and embraced persons with whom the religious elite of his day would have nothing to do. "Sinners" covered a broad spectrum of persons. Of course, we do know that he was available to all, the prostitute of Luke 7, the hated tax collectors such as Matthew and Zaccheus, the Samaritan woman of John 4, Mary Magdalene whose past was colorful. But the category "sinner" referred not only to the obviously tainted, but all non-Jews and all Jews who failed to keep the ritualistic demands of the current interpretation of the Law.

Jesus told the story to defend his openness to all persons, his offer of grace and forgiveness to all who came with a longing to be made new. He told the story of the father with two sons, each son representing different attitudes and situations of persons. The sons are necessary to the story, but the story is really told to reveal the heart of the father. The amazing truth we learn is that the father has a consistent, steady, boundless love for the rebel who leaves home, and for the upright, upright son who stays home.

The one is a rebellious youth who wants his own life, his independence, feeling he cannot be his own person in the presence of the father. The other is a meticulous, humorless, obedient son whose virtue through performance is offered in place of the one thing the father desired - a warm, spontaneous, loving relationship.

The latter described those to whom the parable was addressed. The former described the persons about whom the grumbling occurred: the "sinners" Jesus received.

The Truth of the parable is that God is limitless love, open to all, yearning for all His children, wanting their wellbeing, wanting them to be themselves fully, at home, in the Father's house.

The focus of the first message was the younger son, the rebel who requested his inheritance and left home. He is a mirror of the person who says, "I want to do it on my own!"

The second message pointed to the emptiness that is the end of a life of autonomy, a life which seeks to be a law unto itself, a life lived selfishly, self-indulgently with no meaning or purpose beyond the pleasure of the moment, a life out of relationship of love and trust. Such a life sooner or later raises the question, "Is that all there is?"

That sense of emptiness or meaninglessness can come over one gradually or as a jolting revelation. Sometimes it comes after a period of treadmill existence with life going nowhere. Sometimes it comes about in a crisis. Whatever the concrete situation, we are caused to reflect on our lives, on the choices we have made, the priorities we have set and we may be led to sigh, "I wish I could start over."

That is the place the younger son came to in the story Jesus told. In the midst of the disaster that befell him, he "came to his senses." (NEB)

The Revised Standard Version renders it,

When he came to himself.

Reality hit. Sober reflection on his situation revealed the folly of his ways. He remembered his father and home. He decided to return; he wanted to start over.

Wanting a new beginning is a very common human desire. There are so many areas of our lives that we would like to do over - choices we have made, decisions that directed our life in one course rather than another - to marry or not to marry, to marry this person rather than another, to get an education or not, to pursue one career rather than another, to have a family or not, to make a major move, to start a business. There is no end of the decisions one makes, and every decision becomes a thread in the weaving of the tapestry of our lives. The complexity of decisions forms a web and within that web our lives are caught.

The sigh, "I wish I could start over," is thus not uncommon. Most of us, at one time or another, have known the feeling, the longing for a second chance. But there is no going back.

The very nature of our historical existence is such that we are writing a story in time that is moving from a point of beginning to an end point. Time can be recollected in memory; time can be anticipated in imagination; thus we can transcend the present moment but we cannot unravel time; we cannot undo it. Nor can we freeze it in the present moment. Relentlessly we must move on in the stream of time and to move on is to continue to make decisions. Such is the nature of our human existence.

What might be included in the moment Jesus describes in the story as "coming to himself?" I suppose, first of all, *there was an honest facing up to his life, to his story*. Coming to one's senses or coming to one's self is a moment of Truth. Such moments are rare and precious. So much of our lives never come under honest scrutiny; many persons never come to a moment of Truth at all.

Most of us live with denial; we may consciously suppress the truth of our lives and expend great energy keeping the truth under, or we may be unconscious of the denial and live with a vague restlessness and anxiety. Who am I really? What is the Truth about me? It takes courage to ask that question. Some of us never allow the question to surface.

I doubt that the Elder Brother ever faced the question. Had he honestly engaged himself in dialogue, he might have come to self-awareness of the anger and resentment that were seething beneath the surface of his righteous exterior. He was not a free person, spontaneous, happy. He was without humor. He worked diligently but it was drudgery and life was a drag. When he came upon the joy and celebration of the prodigal's return, it all erupted; the dam burst, the volcano within exploded. He had never really come to know himself.

The younger son paid a price for the choices he made. We must not glamorize his wild fling. He suffered. He came to the edge of despair and we must assume that he carried with him throughout his life some scars from his scrape with desolation. But all of that was as nothing compared to the experience of the moment of Truth. When he finally got the courage to do some serious introspection and to take inventory of his life, he came to himself; he came to the moment of Truth.

Such a moment does not issue in a running away from oneself or a denying of one's life. Indeed, that is precisely what had been the case. He had done his best as long as he could to convince himself that he was glad to be away from the father, on his own, actualizing his own person. As the emptiness became more and more evident, the denial of the mess he had made of things was increasingly difficult to sustain. Finally he could do it no more. Now he owned his life, he owned his story. He had made his choices and this is where it led.

There was no wallowing in self-pity. There was no blaming of his Elder Brother or his father. He faced his life; he took responsibility for it. He decided on a course of action that would enable him to start over, to begin again.

In traditional Christian terminology - biblical terminology - the younger son repented; he changed his mind, changed his thinking. That is the literal meaning of the Greek word *Metanoia*. His thinking was turned around.

The speech he prepared for his father indicates that he was aware of his own responsibility. He says bluntly, "I have sinned against heaven and against you."

The parable shows us what Jesus understands by sin. It is going out from the father's house, i.e., godlessness and remoteness from God working itself out in a life in the world with all its desires and its filth. The word "sin" used in this instance means literally "missing the mark." That puts it well. That was what the younger son came to see, acknowledge, and confess. He said, "I've missed the mark." Today one might say, "I really blew it!"

And then he acted on his new knowledge. He arose and went to his father. He came home. This, too, is a vital step and of critical importance. It is one thing to come to oneself. It is one thing finally to be engaged by the moment of Truth. It is another to act on that insight when it means turning around and facing up to wrong choices and deeds in the presence of family and friends.

This phase of the story we might call conversion - the actual about-face. It involves the honest recognition and acknowledgment that one has been in the wrong and is responsible for "missing the mark" and for appropriate action in light of that acknowledgment - in the case of this story, the actual return to the father.

All of this is included in coming to oneself. It is a crisis. It is devastating. It takes great courage and it is wonderfully liberating.

Our young friend still knows nothing of grace, but he is now ready to face his father and bargain for a chance to start over on the father's terms.

*"Let me be as one of your hired servants;
I know I can no longer expect to be considered your son."*

Thus he brings to expression the longing to start over. Let's reflect on that for a moment. Starting over is not a denial of the past. We write our story. What we are is the compilation of all we have been. Starting over does not rip us out of our past; rather it creates the opportunity for new beginning with the past no more a weight shackling us with guilt and remorse that would hobble our spirit and limit our future.

We own our past. We assume responsibility for it. We are the wiser for it; we live with the consequence of it.

Sometimes that past is something we would not want ever to experience again, but even in its tragic dimension, having gone through it, we would not trade the lessons learned, the experience gained.

One must come to accept and take responsibility for one's own story. Beginning again does not involve amnesia. There is no whitewashing, brainwashing or some other psychological trick that we play on ourselves. We put it behind us and we move on, but the past remains our past. It is our story.

The younger son did not really realize the newness that grace creates. His intention was to return and earn at least servant status. What he was to encounter in the father's loving forgiveness and total acceptance was beyond his wildest dreams.

Move, now, to the attitude and posture of the father. He did not use his authority to hold the young son. He used no coercion, manipulation or guilt trip. He let him go. From the reception he gave the boy on his return, we know this was not because of a lack of love and concern. We will focus on that love in the final message. Why, then, did he simply let the boy go?

The answer is that he knew he would not have his boy home, even if he forced him to live under his roof, until the boy came to himself, until he came to his senses.

That is the only way God's intention can be realized. What he desires is a gracious, personal relationship.

Our relationship with him is not reciprocal in the sense of being "fifty-fifty." He initiates. He offers grace. He sustains us in relationship. But we are not passive blocks of wood. His initiation must call for the response which is a genuine turning toward him. Trust speaks of response. And for response to be the inward movement of the person, it must be elicited but cannot be demanded or forced.

Remember again why Jesus told the story. He was claiming that his very presence was a sign of God's initiating grace, a sign of salvation present and freely offered. To respond to him was to respond to God - to come home to grace.

When the son said, "I want to do it on my own!" the father recognized the always possible option of seeking autonomy rather than relationship. Only when he came subsequently to say, "Is that all there is?" had he made his own discovery that he was on a dead-end street. That was the moment of truth. He came to his senses. He said, "I wish I could start over."

He had not yet encountered grace; he did not yet have the faintest idea of grace. But one thing he remembered: the sadness in his father's eyes when he left. The absence of anger, of threat. The sense that he might cut off his father, but his

father had not responded in kind, cutting him off. The posture of the father built no barriers for return.

In our broken human relationship we often cut off the possibility of return because we respond in kind, anger for anger, wound for wound. Jesus portrays a father whose spirit and action communicate that the door is always open. There he was pleading with the religious leaders saying precisely that - come home, just as he pictured the younger son arising and going to the father.

The good news of the message is that the way is open; the barriers do not exist beyond our own minds. The Father awaits us.

We can start over. We can begin again.

The longing for home is the first sign of grace. The honest owning of one's life, its light and shadow, its goodness and guilt is the dawning of something more wonderful than words can describe. There is much more to tell. We will come to that. But hear this good news, all who are weary, bored, empty, guilty, afraid —

Come home.

You can begin again.