

“God The Prodigal”
Luke 15:11-31
November 4, 2012
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(Please note that I owe a big debt to Timothy Keller and his book “The Prodigal God” that I borrowed from in composing this sermon.)

The Story of the Prodigal Son is one that has been retold time and again in art and literature. It is a powerful, timeless story of redemption. It’s the story of the love of a father for his son. It’s the story of having a second chance. A story of being lost and found. It is story of hope.

Years ago the Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen found himself standing before Rembrandt’s rendition of “The Prodigal Son” and was so moved by the painting that he wrote a book. Nouwen called his book, “The Return of the Prodigal – The Story of Homecoming.” In it Nouwen described how the story of the Prodigal was one that met his own journey in life. Nouwen said, “There are as many paintings in the Prodigal Son as there are changes in the day.” In other words this story of “The Prodigal” is layered with meaning.

How about each of us as we consider “The Story of the Prodigal?” Most of us remember it as story of how a son leaves behind his family and spends away his inheritance on a pleasure seeking lifestyle. Then when he has nothing left and realizes the error of his ways he finds his way back home and receives the amazing, unwarranted, unconditional love of his father.

The younger brother at the beginning of the story really is a despicable character. This is a young man with the audacity to go his father and ask for his share of the family property. He had audacity because what the younger son is really saying to his father that he wishes his father were dead, In those days, it was the custom of the culture that when the head of the family died, the fortune would have been divided equally between the children with the eldest getting a double share. The youngest is basically saying to his father, “I wish you were dead, now give me the money. Give me a third of everything you have!”

You can only imagine the reaction of those who were present listening to Jesus tell this story. They would have been shocked by the younger brother’s request, yet they would have been even more shocked by the Father’s response because the father agreed to his son’s

request. And then, after treating his father like an ATM, the young man heads off to another country and spends it all on “dissolute” living...which is a polite way of saying that he blew it all on booze, prostitutes, gambling, entertainment, and whatever else you can think of.

But then things went really bad for the young man. Eventually, the money ran out. He ended up getting a job feeding pigs. This would have been scandalous to the original listeners of this story. In the Jewish tradition, especially in Jesus’ day, there was no animal more despised and considered more filthy than a pig. Remember when Jesus cast out the demons from the man in Matthew’s gospel? The demons ended up in the pigs that ran into the sea...that’s because to faithful Jews that’s all pigs were good for. So the idea that this young man had to get a job feeding pigs and then found himself wishing he could eat the pods that the pigs were eating shows us how low he had sunk. No one would give him anything to eat...he had taken the generosity of his father for granted and learned that such generosity is seldom experienced in this world.

The youngest son’s journey of self-discovery and individual fulfillment was one that led to a loss of reputation, extreme humiliation and utter depravity. He had alienated himself from his family. He was lost and he knew it. So what a wonder it is that when he returns to his home, that his father receives him with open arms and kisses him when he sees him. But more than this, his father tells his servants to put his best robe on this lost son of his, to put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Many of Jesus’ listeners present that day would not have liked what they were hearing. The father in the story owed his son nothing, so no matter if the son was truly repentant or not, many would have felt as if the father should have given him nothing. The father owed him nothing.

Fred Craddock tells a story about when we preached on this parable once, how a member of the congregation who had listened to his sermon told him how he didn’t care for what he heard. Craddock asked, “Why?”

The man said. “Well, I guess I just don’t like that story.”

Craddock asked, “What is it you don’t like about it?”

He said. “It’s not morally responsible.”

Craddock asked, “What do you mean by that?”

“Forgiving that boy,” said the man. “It’s not morally responsible!”

Craddock asked, “Well, what would you have done?”

The man said, “I think when he came home he should’ve been arrested.”

Craddock asked the man, “What would you have given the prodigal?”

The man said, “Six years.”

That would’ve been the attitude of a lot of Jesus’ listeners that day. It may be our reaction to this story too. These reactions echo the sentiments of the Older Brother. Remember this is the story of two sons. The older is as important to our understanding this story as is the younger. Jesus tells this story not only to tell a story about the lostness of the younger brother which most of his audience and most of us can understand. But Jesus also wants his listeners to consider the lostness of the older brother. The one who is lost and doesn’t know it. He is lost, lost, lost, lost, lost, lost.

You see, this story of “The Two Sons” comes as the third of three parables in a row here in Luke’s Gospel that have to do with being lost. There is the Parable of the Lost Sheep, The Parable of the Lost Coin...and then this story about Two Sons Who Were Lost. The reason we can say that both sons were lost is because when we look closely, we realize that neither son really wanted a relationship with their father. They just wanted their Father’s things. We already saw this with the younger son but how do we see it in the older brother?

We see it in how the older brother responds to his father. When his younger brother finally repents and returns home this is probably the happiest day of his father’s life. His father, who thought he had lost a son, discovered that he had two sons again. His father was so happy that he kills the fatted calf in celebration. This is a big deal! Back then, meat wasn’t a regular part of the daily diet. Something like a fatted calf would have been incredibly valuable. The father who has already given so much to his younger son willing to give more. And all the older brother could see was his father wasting what was now should have been his.

There is a story of a Sunday school teacher who wanted the children of her class to recognize the reaction of the elder brother. She asked them, to name who, in the midst of the festivities, failed to share in the jubilant spirit of the occasion.

"Can anybody in the class," he asked, "tell me who this was?"

A small boy, who had been listening sympathetically to the story, put up his hand.

"I know," he said. "It was the fatted calf."

When the older brother finds out that his father has killed the fatted calf and is sparing no expense by having a big welcome home party for his brother the elder refuses to join the party. In fact he gets angry. He gets angry with his father and says "Look, you have never so much as given me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But this son of yours (notice that he does not acknowledge his brother as his own) but he says, "This son of yours comes home and you give him even more." This is where we see the lostness of the older brother. It is the lostness of one who believed that as long as he followed all the rules and remained obedient to his father's wishes that he would eventually get what he was owed. In other words, like the younger brother, the older brother was more interested in having his father's things than actually having a relationship with his father. We see this because he refuses to share in his father's happiness. The older brother refuses to join the party. His pride and his sense of moral righteousness was keeping him from being in relationship with his family. His heart wasn't for his father...it was for his father's things.

In telling this parable, Jesus wanted his listeners to consider if maybe they were like the older brother in the story. Individuals whose moralism and self-righteousness was preventing them from seeing the true nature and the incredible generosity of the Father. You see, as an adjective, the word prodigal means "spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant." And yes, at one level it describes, how the younger brother lived a part of his life, but in this story the word prodigal more appropriately describes the behaviour of the Father. And for Jesus, the Father in the story represents God. The Prodigal God. A God who is willing to give us everything we need to have a place at the banquet and free us from the things in life that we thought would free us.

There are times when we need to be freed from the things in life we think will free us. This understanding is at the heart of a story retold by Timothy Keller. It's the short story about a bicycle cab driver in Vietnam named Hai who is in love with a beautiful prostitute named Lan. Both Hai and Lan have unfulfilled desires. Hai is in love with Lan, but he cannot afford her. Lan lives in poverty and longs to live in the beautiful hotels where she works as a prostitute but can

never spend the night. She hopes the money she earns from prostitution will help her escape, that it will free her, but it only enslaves her more deeply.

Then Hai enters a bicycle cab race and wins the top prize. He takes the money and brings Lan to the hotel where he pays for the night and pays her fee. Then he tells her, that he just wants to watch her fall asleep. Instead of using his wealth to control her, he buys her a place in the normal world in order to fulfil her desire to belong. Lan doesn't like this at first, thinking that Hai just wants to control her, but then she understands that he only wants to extend a heart of generosity. When this happens, Lan finds her life transformed and she can no longer go back to a life of prostitution.

You see my friends our relationship with God is no different. The God of the Bible is the prodigal who spares no expense and gives extravagantly in order that we might know what it means to have a heart of love. God wants to free us from the things we thought would free us and instead gives us a heart for God. In Jesus, God is like the ultimate rich man who becomes poor for our sake. God does not seek to enslave us...God seeks only to love us and desires us to do the same.

As we think about this with a mind to Christian stewardship, we should see ourselves called to give less out of a sense of duty and more out of a sense of beauty for what God has done and is willing to do. That is what the generosity of the father in the story reveals for us. Stewardship is about enjoying God. Stewardship is about having a heart for God. About sharing in God's love for us and others. We support our church because we participate in this story and we long for others to share this same story and join the banquet. It is not only the story of A Man With Two Sons...it is the story of The Prodigal God.

Thanks be to God.