

Famine of the Heart
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

We humans are a competitive species. Make no mistake, when it comes down to it, we aren't a whole lot different than many others in the "animal kingdom." Human beings are for most part the only ones who make great attempts to rise above/override our baser instincts in the name of the greater good.

We are not merely physical and territorial beings. Humans are complex creatures. While we may compete for basic needs, power, and status, at the same time, we harbor a deep spiritual hunger and yearn to find meaning and purpose in our lives, build relationships and community, and find fulfillment and peace within our hearts and souls.

Whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, we turn to find solace and guidance in God's direction for our lives, especially when our instincts tend to blind us to our deeper needs. For when we allow our animal nature to run awry, the more our lairs fill with bounty, the more we deplete the fullness and wellness of our spirits. When this happens, I like to say, we are experiencing a "famine of the heart."

In our scripture for today, Jesus tells a story about what it means to experience a "famine of the heart."

He had been spending time teaching those whom the religious authorities considered "bad influences" –tax collectors, and others who have committed sins of one kind or another. As usual, they began grumbling about it, gossiping about it, complaining about it, throwing verbal and visual arrows Jesus' way!

So, in Jesus' usual style, instead of launching into a set of precepts, he began to tell a story. We call this story, "The Prodigal Son." Prodigal because the son in question recklessly and carelessly spent his entire inheritance on frivolous things. Son, because no matter what he did, he remained his Father's son!

The story begins with a saga of two sons. For Jesus, this may refer to two groups: 1) the tax collectors and sinners and 2) the religious folk who follow "the rules."

The errant son feels the need to "sow his wild oats" so he requests his inheritance and then he goes out on a wild and woolly spending spree, trying to find fulfillment by filling his every desire. Now here comes the famine.

"When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need." His spiritual and emotional tank was empty.

Now we don't need to be addicts to understand this kind of emptiness and the desire to fill it. We've all experienced this at some point in our lives. Whether we've gone through a tough adolescence, a divorce, a death, loss of a job or purpose, or simply some big changes in our lives, we can find ourselves trying to fill that emotional pain and void with something –anything—that can give us momentary reprieve.

But at some point that well always runs dry, and we are faced with our own existential pain. We call it "hitting rock bottom." It's the time we must face our demons, call them out, make changes, and move on.

In the case of the son, once his emotional and spiritual famine as well as physical famine set in, he had his "come to Jesus moment,". He understood the mistake he had made. He knew he had messed up. He felt the need to repent without expectation. And he was humbled and willing to serve instead of being served: "Treat me like one of your hired hands." "I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

At that key moment, his life began. He was able to move forward again. He was able to grow and learn. He was able to make amends, and start again. He was able to find his peace.

And his father's reaction certainly was not what either of his sons expected!

The Father is wise. He knows exactly what has happened. And instead of decrying the past, he embraces his son's future. He recognizes his repentance, delights in his return, and celebrates his restoration, his "resurrection." His heart, which had suffered his own spiritual famine, had been revived again!

So, the father responds: "Let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! And they began to celebrate."

If we stopped reading at this point, we might think, wow, this was the moral of the story, and the story has now ended. But it has not!

The religious officials had enough trouble with the first part of the story, they must have been flabbergasted and indignant! After all, in their estimation, the father had been too lenient on this errant son! No real father would do such a thing.

In true Jesus' fashion, he continues his story. In a sense, the religious group had just become "actors" in Jesus' storyline. They "are" the angry brothers! In fact, their responses are likely the same as the second son in Jesus' story! Can you imagine them nodding their heads in approval at the second son's rebuke?

And yet Jesus continues.... In response to the angry brother, the father says: "This brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." Jesus leaves it all right there. In the silence, you can hear only a heartbeat. The heartbeat of resurrection!

Who in the story suffers from famine of the heart? The first son of course, but the second son also.

He may have grown up following every rule, obeying every law, following every direction, remaining loyal to the household....but without the ability to celebrate his brother's win, without the desire to embrace his brother's repentance and resurrection, his heart remains sadly quiet. You see, for Jesus, not all death is physical; not all resurrections are merely of the body.

The first "son" has had a resurrection of the spirit, a rejuvenation of the heart. The second requires the same. "Repentance is not only asked of the one who sins, but of the one who resents the resurrection and repentance of the sinner."

The question Jesus asks of us is this: Are we able to celebrate the blessings of others? Are we able to celebrate God's mercy upon others?

Or are we so anchored into our "measurement mentality" and our imperial instincts that we feel only resentment, anger, envy, and bitterness when a "sinner" commits to change?

What does your inner landscape look like? Is it the lush, green landscape of acceptance and growth?

Or the barren, dry desert of resentment and envy?

Is your heart beating with Jesus' resurrection promise?

No matter who you are –or what kind of "sinner" you may be –Jesus offers you resurrection! A new life!