

When We Feel Lost

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

George Buttrick, has said that Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son captures "the essence of the Christian faith." It is a story of repentance and forgiveness and grace. It is also a story of self-righteousness, resentment and anger. It has a familiar beginning, "There was a man who had two sons." Here we are introduced to three characters.

The first, of course, is the prodigal. He's the younger boy. Adventurous. Rebellious. Determined to learn life's lessons by making his own mistakes. We've all been there.

In Jesus' story the younger son says to his father, "give me my inheritance." So, the father divides his estate between his two sons, and the younger one sets off for a distant country and wastes his wealth on wild living. After the money is gone there's a famine in the country, and he's in trouble. So, he hires himself to a local farmer who sends him out to feed pigs, which is the worst job in the world for a good Jewish boy. He is so hungry, he would gladly have eaten the pods that the pigs are eating.

Luke then tells us, "He comes to senses." He heads home. Home looks awfully good. However, is he truly sorry or is he simply play-acting, so he can worm himself back into his father's good graces? We don't know. Since this is a parable and not a real-life incident, there is no follow-up. We can only imagine that he is heading home for good.

Or maybe not! Some of you may know a young person who has become involved with drugs. The first thing to go is their truthfulness. Many parents today know what it is to have a young person on drugs come back home, confess their sins, vow to do better, and then not only leave again but steal money on the way out the door. In these cases, a parent asks, "How many times am I supposed to forgive? How many times do I let them come back home?" Some prodigals repent many times, but never really come home.

Let's assume the young man the parable is truly sorry. We can sympathize with him. He's learned some hard lessons, but at least he is back home. Most of all, he's learned how lonesome it can be when you turn your back on those who love you. He has done wrong. Now he is headed toward the safety of his father's house. The prodigal is the first character in this remarkable story.

The second character is his father. The young man has rehearsed what he is going to say to his father. 'I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like your hired servant.' So, he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The father said to his servants, Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'

The father represents God. God in all God's grace and love. Helmut Thielicke says this parable ought to be called the Parable of the Waiting Father rather than the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Everything depends on God's grace.

There is a fascinating painting by the Dutch artist Rembrandt called, “The Return of the Prodigal Son.” Some have called this work the greatest picture ever painted. In the painting the son has returned home. He kneels before his father in repentance, wishing for forgiveness and a renewed place in the family. Standing at his right is his older brother, who crosses his hands in judgment.

A fascinating aspect of this painting is the portrayal of the father’s hands as he bends over to embrace his son. The father’s left hand is a strong, masculine hand, the kind of hand that you expect a father to have. But the right hand is different. It is smaller. It is a soft feminine hand. Think of the significance of that one figure but with noticeably different hands one masculine, the other feminine.

Henri Nouwen noticed the difference and, in his book, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, comments on the painting, “As soon as I recognized the difference between the two hands of the father, a new world of meaning opened for me. The Father is not simply a patriarch. He is mother as well as father. He touches the son with a masculine hand and a feminine hand. He holds, and she caresses. He confirms and she consoles. He is, indeed, God, in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood, are fully present.

God is neither male nor female. God is spirit. Masculine and feminine are characteristics of physical, created beings. God encompasses the best characteristics of both sexes. Most important of all, God’s character is one of unconditional love.

But there is a third character, the older brother. The older brother didn’t leave home. He didn’t lose his inheritance. He stayed; he was obedient. But listen to how he responds to his brother’s return: “When he came to the house, he heard music and dancing. So, he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’”

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’”

He refers to his relationship with his father. “I’ve been slaving for you.” Those are revealing words. Not “working for you” or “serving you” or “helping with the family farm.” but slaving for his father. He doesn’t refer to the prodigal as his brother, but as “this son of yours.”

The father seeks to set him straight. “My son,” his father says, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” The father reminds the older son that this is his brother!

The older brother is spiteful, angry, resentful. And we understand that. We sometimes wonder why God bends over backward to welcome back the wayward and seems to ignore those of us who have always played by the rulebook. It is hard to accept that Jesus sees more hope in the much-deserved humility of the prodigal than the self-righteous indignation of his brother. Jesus is telling this parable to the religious leaders of the day.

The story of the prodigal is intended to give hope to the tax collectors and the sinners. But it is a devastating judgment on the attitudes and actions of the scribes and Pharisees. For you see, they are the older brother in Jesus' parable keeping the Law but looking with disdain upon those not as righteous as them. And friends, that is how the church appears to many people in our society today.

Three characters: the penitent prodigal; his loving and gracious parent representing God; and the smug, self-righteous brother. If you are the prodigal, come home. It's not too late. If you are the older brother, come home. It's harder for you to see your transgressions than it is to see the transgressions of your brothers or sisters, but your transgression of self-righteousness may be the deadliest transgression of all. Come home to the waiting arms of your loving God.