

New Testament Reading Luke 15: 11-32

The Lost Ones- The younger son

Part Two

Last week, we learned that Jesus was walking up the road to Jerusalem for the last time... As he walked, he took the opportunity to teach the crowds... there were basically two groups of people who were attracted to Jesus...the tax collectors/sinners...and the Pharisees. The tax collectors and the sinners were attracted to Jesus because he accepted them; he welcomed them and ate meals together with them. The Pharisees were attracted to Jesus because they were determined to catch him out...to challenge his understanding of the Torah. Altogether these people represented 2 categories of people; lost ones who knew they were lost and lost ones who didn't realize that they were lost. Jesus tried to show all of them that God loved everyone without exception.

Today we are going to look at the first part of the third lost story traditionally called the Prodigal Son. First of all, have you ever thought about what the word "prodigal" means? The prodigal son? In my family, whenever one of my brothers came home from university, my Mum would cook him his favourite meal... she called it "the prodigal son dinner"..."Let's kill the fattened calf!" she would say. We have a reason to celebrate! My husband Brian, even before he officially became part of my family, learned to eagerly anticipate a meal of leg of lamb and mint jelly- his prodigal son dinner when we went to my parents' home. This meal reassured him that he had his feet firmly planted under the family table!

But did you know that the word prodigal has two meanings...it means both wasteful AND extravagant? We know that the prodigal son was wasteful...he wasted his inheritance on riotous living... or in the Phillips translation, he squandered his wealth in the wildest extravagance... but the Father too was correspondingly extravagant or prodigious...extravagant in his expression of patience, love and grace to BOTH of his sons. Another name for this parable is "the Waiting Father." So in this parable we have three characters: the waiting Father, a prodigal son...and.... so what do we call the elder son? As we will see next week, he is also a prodigal son, not in a distant country like his brother...rather "hiding in plain sight" in the home of his father.

So Jesus began his teaching. The tax collectors and sinners were hoping to hear a word of grace for they knew who they were... outsiders...unacceptable to the Pharisees but accepted by Jesus. On the other hand, the Pharisees were hoping to catch Jesus out.

In his third illustration.... we learn about a man and his two sons. The younger son was very bold and straightforward about what he wanted. He approached his father and demanded full rights of possession over his share of the father's estate. This request was a huge no-no in their culture...the equivalent of the son saying to his father...I wish you were dead. The ultimate in cheekiness... A slap in the face ... a huge embarrassment to the father. But graciously the father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons while he was still living and to give his younger son his portion of his inheritance.

Dividing the father's wealth was very complicated. The father's estate consisted of land, possessions and livestock. The older son was entitled by law to 2/3 of the father's estate because it was expected that he, as the eldest child, would continue to live on the land after his father's death and continue to provide for the extended household. Whatever children remaining were entitled to share 1/3 of the estate. To give his younger son that much cash, the father likely had to sell one third of his land, his livestock and his possessions. Even while they were still alive, the father and the elder son had to make do with less in order for the father to fulfill the younger son's request. The younger son's selfishness affected everyone in the household.

The story goes on...the younger son moved away from the watchful eye of his father to a distant country. The Bible says the younger son wasted his inheritance on riotous living. Those were the only details that we were given about this part of his time away. At some point, his money ran out. At the same time, coincidentally there was also a great famine in the land. The younger son was forced to feed the pigs, and he even coveted the pigs' food, but no one gave him anything to eat. It was the ultimate degradation that he, a Jewish boy, would even have to consider working with pigs or eating pigs' food and even then find himself starving.

The younger son reached the end of his rope, and the bottom of the pit. The Bible says, "He comes to his senses." What does he comes to his senses actually mean?" Does the Bible say

that the youngest son missed his father and older brother and longed to come home? No...it is possible that home was the last place he wanted to go. Remember he had embarrassed his father. His older brother had also suffered because of the younger brother's selfish request. The youngest son felt ashamed... worthless...guilty... after all he had wasted his inheritance and had run out of options. His big push for independence was a huge failure! He knew he didn't deserve anything from his father. He might have anticipated that both his father and brother had written him off! So why did he decide to make the long trek home? What happened? Interestingly enough, the prospect of starvation was his wake-up call! Starvation! A pretty big motivation don't you think? The only thing that the youngest son dared to hope is that his father might receive him back as one of his hired servants. He reasoned that at least the hired servants in his father's household had enough to eat.

So he came up with a plan...He decided to go back to his father. During the long journey home, the younger son had lots of time to go over his speech in his mind. **Point One:** He knew he was not worthy to be treated as a son. He did not expect to experience the Father's grace. **Point Two:** He only hoped for food to stave off his hunger. **Point Three:** He only hoped to be allowed to come back home as a servant.

The Bible says that while the son was a long way off, his waiting father saw him coming. This suggests that during his absence, his father was continually looking for him, scanning the horizon, and hoping that he would come home. When he saw his son in the distance, the father hoisted up his robes and ran with joy and abandon. In their culture, the patriarch of the family would never hoist up his robe and run with joy! It was undignified! Remember

that the son had spent a long time working with the pigs in a filthy pigpen. There were no modern amenities like showers and Laundromats. He had walked many miles to come home! Nevertheless, the father overlooked his outward appearance and embraced him. So overjoyed was the father with his son's return, that he didn't listen to his son's full confession. The father put up his hand and said...say no more... all is forgiven my son.

Do you notice the extremely high value that the father put on the **relationship** with his son? The waiting father did not focus on everything that he had given to his son that had been lost or squandered...rather the son was immediately given a robe, a signet ring and shoes...The robe was a robe of kinship. The ring was a family signet ring signifying that he was a member of that family. The shoes represented the fact that his father considered him to be a free man, and not a slave...all of these gifts were symbolic of complete restoration of the son to the father. And the father killed the fattened calf and celebrated with the whole extended community! The son who was lost was home!

So we have come full circle in the three stories...in the first, one in 100 sheep was lost and was found, in the second, one in 10 coins was lost and was found, but in the final story one in 2 sons was lost and was found. Last week, I left you with some homework... to read this passage again, and to try to identify with either the younger son, or the older son. For those of us who identify with the younger son...notice what happened...remember it was the younger son who had not followed the rules, had shamed his father, and had wasted his inheritance who was immediately welcomed back and restored to his father...although the

younger son had thought up a plan for partial restoration, the father had a better plan...the father had no intention of taking the son back as a hired servant...no, he was restored to full sonship with all of its rights and privileges AND responsibilities.

What does it mean to repent? ... Simply stated, it means to turn around and go in the other direction. And this is precisely what he did. He turned back from "his distant country," and set his eyes towards home. Was his repentance perfect? No... Did he have perfect motivation for returning to his father? No... But even given his awkward and self-serving attempt at repentance, the younger son received back so much more than he could ever have imagined or hoped for... full rights as a son in his father's household.

And to the younger sons (and daughters) here today...I believe that this story teaches us too about the challenge of accepting forgiveness. According to the great theologian Henri Nouwen, receiving God's forgiveness is one of the most difficult things that humans can do. Receiving God's forgiveness involves relinquishing our control over our own lives and turning back from wherever our distant countries are. It involves letting God be God, and letting God do ALL of the work of restoring, healing and forgiving. It means SUBMISSION...submitting ourselves to God in all of our sinfulness and allowing ourselves to be accepted and loved by God. Just like the shepherd was totally responsible for finding and bringing the sheep back to the fold, and the woman was totally responsible for finding her lost coin, so God the Father is totally responsible for the restoration of his lost ones. Lost ones like me...lost ones like you!

Reflect on this truth...There is nothing that you can do to make God love you more, and nothing that you can do to make God love you less. Isn't it so human of us, even in our repentance and desire to turn around our lives, that we think up a plan...our desire for control is so strong.

Yet, even when we are in our chosen distant country, trying to hide from God, we are never beyond the reach of God's love, and he is constantly longing for our return. Let us rejoice that God's Grace is greater than all our sin...Let us return from our distant country to the joy of full fellowship with our God and his prodigal love and forgiveness. Thanks be to God for his unspeakable love and grace. AMEN