

Home

Luke 15:1–3a, 11–32

In 1986, Henri Nouwen, a Dutch theologian and writer, toured St. Petersburg, Russia, the former Leningrad. While there he visited the famous Hermitage where he saw, among other things, Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son. The painting was in a hallway and received the natural light of a nearby window. Newman stood for two hours, mesmerized by this remarkable painting. As he stood there the sun changed, and at every change of the light's angle he saw a different aspect of the painting revealed. He would later write: 'There were as many paintings in the Prodigal Son as there were changes in the day.'

It is difficult for us to see something new in the parable of the Prodigal son. We have heard the story so many times we believe that we have squeezed it dry of meaning. Not only that, but, as the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt. When we hear the opening words of the parable once again, 'And there was a father who had two sons,' we greet the words with ho-hum. Heard it. Heard it. Heard it.

Yet, I would suggest that just as Henri Nouwen saw a half dozen different facets to the painting as he stood and watched the light change, we can learn by looking at this parable from different angles, learn more about who we are, learn more about the God who loves us, and learn more about how God calls us home.

We can see that by just looking at how we talk about this parable. We most commonly call it the parable of the prodigal son. The word prodigal means 1) wastefully or recklessly extravagant, 2) giving or yielding profusely, or 3) lavishly abundant. From those definitions, one can see how the term could be used either positively or negatively. We usually think of

the younger son, the one who goes away and is wasteful with his demanded inheritance, as the prodigal son.

Sometimes the Parable of the Prodigal Son is known as the Parable of the Lost Son. Here in Luke 15, the tax collectors and "sinners" are drawing near to hear Jesus. They are the ones who know that they are lost, the outcasts from society, who can find no way to justify themselves in terms of the Law. Jesus tells three parables about lost things. He first tells the parable of the lost sheep, of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep behind to go and find the one who has gotten itself lost. Then he tells the parable of the lost coin, of the woman who loses one of her ten coins, who then lights her lamp and sweeps her house until she finds it. And then, thirdly, he tells this parable the lost son.

Others suggest, better still, the Parable of the Two Lost Sons, since we must not overlook the elder son, who is also lost and alienated from his father. Jesus isn't just surrounded by "sinners" as he tells these parables. Jesus is also surrounded by the Pharisees and the scribes, the religious leaders who are certain that they're not lost. They know every letter of the law, know everything about God. And they know that God would never be found among these lost people.

But that's not the only way to look at it. Since "Prodigal," means extravagant, reckless, or even wasteful), Phillip Yancey calls it the Parable of the Prodigal Father because of the father's extravagant grace. The Father holds nothing back from his sons. And since the father is often seen as representing God, the late

pastor Tim Keller says this story points us to our Prodigal God!

But today I want to focus in on the aspect of home in this parable. Home is what the younger son has, rejects, and eventually returns to. Home is what the father tries to maintain. And home is what the older son has, even as he resents it.

How do you define home? Maybe you think of the phrase, "Home is where the heart is." Maybe you think of the house you live in now, or the house you grew up in, or a place that gave stability to a childhood that didn't have much.

In a very real sense, though, we're never really home no matter where we go in life. We may say, "There's no place like home;" but after the Fall, this world full of sin was never meant to be home. As the hymn goes, "I'm but a stranger here. Heaven is my home." Ultimately, wherever we go on earth it's just a rest stop, a layover. We know we're just passing through, looking for home.

It's said there are two kinds of stories; a man goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town. Going on a journey often involves leaving home, confronting new and different places, new and different people, new and different ideas. It brings changes and growth. Having someone new come to town does the same thing in reverse. It shows familiar things through unfamiliar eyes, noticing details that are overlooked because of their familiarity.

The youngest son is both. He goes on a journey, and returns home changed, seemingly a stranger. The first son is easy to see as lost. He demands his inheritance early, essentially telling his father he wishes he was dead. He goes off to a far country, loses what he has, and

discovers he's lost. He's so lost, in fact, he's sent off into the fields to take care of pigs. Now some of you know how hard it can be to care for pigs, to feed them and walk them and keep them clean and muck out their stalls. But when you remember pigs are an unclean animal that Jews weren't supposed to eat, let alone touch, we see how far he has fallen.

And then we're told the son comes to himself, or comes to his senses. He realizes how good he had it in his father's house, and how good even the servants had it in his father's house. So, he returns home, with a speech all written in his head to beg his father to take him back, not as a son, but as merely a servant.

But after that joyful homecoming, we see the other lost son. The oldest son, who has dutifully remained at his father's side, doesn't see the joy at his brother's return. In fact, he doesn't refer to him as his brother, but calls him "this son of yours" to his father. But he's lost, too. He's worked only out of duty, not out of love. He, too, sees his father only as a source of an inheritance, as someone who will give him what he's earned. He demonstrates, as Philip Yancey reminds us, that the opposite of sin is grace, not virtue.

And while it's easy to point to the one who runs away as some not to emulate, many of us identify more with the older son. As Henri Nouwen writes, "The more I reflect on the elder son in me, the more I realize how deeply rooted this form of lostness really is and how hard it is to return home from there. Returning home from a lustful escapade seems so much easier than returning home from a cold anger that has rooted itself in the deepest corners of my being."

But both sons are invited to be at home with their father. When the younger son returns, the

father refuses to accept him back as merely a slave. Instead, he welcomed him back as a son with a homecoming feast that would rival any other party. The celebration of the younger son's return was so great to show that, despite everything the son had done, he had a home, a place in his father's family.

If you look at Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal son, you will notice that he has frozen the story just at the moment before the son receives all of the tangible gifts from his father. The son does not have a robe placed over his shoulders, he does not have his father's ring on his finger, he does not have good shoes on his feet. Instead, one foot is bare and worn from suffering in this world. But what the son does have is his father. In the presence of his father, he is led to trust that he shall not want anything else. In the presence of his father, he is home.

So, too, our Lord has called us to live as his people in faith. When Jesus spoke to his disciples, he encouraged them to take up their cross and follow him. Life in this world will not be easy. It will not be filled with the best that this world has to offer. But it will be filled with God's love. His heavenly Father's work will continue, after he rises and ascends into heaven, and we have the privilege of being called into God's mission. We are the children of God, at work in our Father's kingdom, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth, calling others to join us on our way home.

One of the great stories of Israel's past was of course the Exodus, when Israel was brought out of Egypt and came home to the promised land. Many years later, after long rebellion, Israel was sent into exile in Babylon; and, though many of the exiles returned, most of Jesus' contemporaries reckoned that they were still living in virtual exile, in evil and dark days, with pagans ruling over them. They were still

waiting for God to produce a new Exodus, a liberation which would bring them out of their spiritual and social exile and restore their fortunes once and for all. For Jesus to tell a story about a wicked son, lost in a foreign land, who was welcomed back with a lavish party – this was bound to be heard as a reference to the hope of Israel. Just as God had brought his people home in the Exodus, just as God had brought his people home after the exile, now he was bringing them home once again.

Robert Frost wrote "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." God, the Father, saw how we had become slaves in his world. Exiled and lost in our sinful pleasures. In love, He sent his Son Jesus. Jesus entered our exile, endured the death of our desolation, and rose from the grave to send us his Spirit who brings us home. Home to our heavenly Father. In baptism, the Spirit makes us children of God. Once we were slaves but now, we are children. Children and heirs. Heirs of a new world, a new kingdom that Jesus is bringing. But most importantly, heirs of God. Because as the younger son finds out at the end of the parable, a child always has a place at home.

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