

## The Prodigal Son—Luke 15: 11-32

On March 30, my friend and colleague Rabbi Deb Smith and I gave a Zoom presentation on the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The cover of Henri Nouwen's book *The Return of the Prodigal Son* has a famous painting of The Prodigal's return home. It is by Rembrandt. It is in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. The painting is 8 feet high and 6 feet wide. Who are the figures? The Father and the Prodigal in his rags are clear. Who is the tall figure on the right? He represents the Pharisees and scribes or the elder son. Harder to see is a seated man beating his breast and looking at the returning son. He is a steward representing the sinners and tax collectors.

This parable is usually called "The Prodigal Son." What would be some other titles? Is what happens in this parable fair? Is God fair?

### The Prodigal

To begin with, it was disrespectful and irregular for the younger son to demand his inheritance. He was breaking family ties and treating his father as though he can't wait for his father to die.

Leaving home is living as though we don't already have a home. Leaving home means trying to find a love other than God's love. But the world's love is and always will be conditional.

When Luke writes, "and left for a distant country," he indicates much more than the desire of a young man to see more of the world. He speaks about a drastic cutting loose from the way of living, thinking, and acting that has been handed down to him from generation to generation as a sacred legacy. More than disrespect, it is a betrayal of the treasured values of family and community.

In the far country—that is, a Gentile country—he was dumb enough to lose all that his father had been smart enough to make and to save. He finally wound up in the lowest place a Jewish boy could go—having to feed pigs! The pods referred to were the pods of the carob tree, eaten by animals and, at times, by the extremely poor. They sometimes have been called "St. John's bread" because St. John the Baptist was supposed to have eaten them in the wilderness. There, in the pit of failure, Jesus said, 'He came to himself' It was as though he woke up from a coma. The journey home begins with coming to oneself.

In a sense, we all need to come to ourselves. We run to faraway places searching for love that cannot be found there. Nouwen talks about how we listen to voices of parents, friends, teachers, colleagues, and the media. As long as we remain in touch with the voice that calls us the Beloved, the other voices are harmless. But when we forget the voice of the first unconditional love, then innocent suggestions can start to dominate our life and pull us into a "distant country." When this is happening, anger, resentment, jealousy, desire for revenge, lust, greed, antagonisms, and rivalries are the signs that we have left home. "I am the prodigal son," says Nouwen, "every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found."

### The Elder Son

The older brother probably got a two-thirds share of the inheritance, simply by virtue of his birth order, while the prodigal got only one third. If there were more than two children, the oldest son probably would have received one half of the estate and everyone else would have received a portion of what was left. First-born sons occupied exceedingly powerful positions in ancient family systems. This explains why in the Old Testament story of Esau and Jacob there was such a tremendous struggle over who was going to get the family blessing and birthright.

The elder brother represents all of us who think we can make it on our own, all of us who might be proud of the kind of lives we live. Those who would live by merit can never know the joy of grace. In the Rembrandt painting, the elder son represents scribes and Pharisees. This parable could be called "The parable of the lost sons" The elder son is as lost as the younger son, but his lostness is harder to identify.

When I was young, I really identified with the elder son. Because I had not done anything as dramatic as the Prodigal, I didn't recognize my own prodigalness. But I knew well that I was the oldest of three girls by 6 1/2 and 8 years. I remember growing up resenting the fact that I had to take responsibility for my younger sisters—

picking up after them when they left their toys all over the house. I felt it was unfair.. Do you think the father should have given the party to the elder son?

The parable does not tell us about the elder son's final willingness to let himself be found. Is the elder son willing to confess that he too, is a sinner in need of forgiveness? Is he willing to acknowledge that he is not better than his brother?

### The Father

Naming this parable "The Prodigal Son" really puts the emphasis in the wrong place. This parable is really about the loving father who happened to have two sons.

Some people are shocked that the father would give the younger son his share of the inheritance when the young man was so rebellious and immature. Didn't the father know the younger son well enough to know the son would squander the inheritance? However, this is exactly how God's wisdom works in relation to our freedom. God allows us to learn for ourselves through pain what we refuse to be taught from those wiser than we are, and in the prodigal's case it worked. When the prodigal does venture back home, he encounters nothing but gladness and acceptance from his father. In ancient Palestine it was considered undignified for a grown man to run; yet when the father saw his son, he set all propriety aside and ran. The important thing is what the prodigal has learned, not what it has cost. Unlike average human love, the father's love is not conditional. That is why God's love is so hard for us to fathom. But it is what we all long for—someone who will accept us totally despite what we have done. The retreat conductor we had once told us, "God is like a GPS. If you make a wrong turn, it doesn't say 'You jerk!' It just says 'Recalculating.'"

There is a detail that Nouwen points out that I would not have otherwise noticed. If you look at the hands in the Rembrandt painting, you see they are quite different. The left hand looks strong and masculine. The hand seems not only to touch, but to hold. The right hand does not hold or grasp. It is refined, soft, and very tender. It lies gently upon the son's shoulder. It is a mother's hand. The Father is not simply a great patriarch. He is mother as well as father.

With whom do you identify?

### Some further thoughts

This parable can be reassuring to parents or teachers of teenagers who seemingly refuse to listen to anything they are being taught. Even in the midst of headlong rebellion and self-destructive behavior, God is not absent or without resources to bless. Self-imposed pain is often a great teacher, which explains why neither God nor Jesus abandons hope for the lowliest of outcasts. The lowly are often the most ripe for coming to themselves precisely because of what their mistakes have taught them. God is far more interested in our future than our past, and more concerned about what we have learned from our mistakes than the fact that we have made them.

It is never too late to turn back to the merciful Father. We did not create our relationship with God by what we did; therefore, we cannot forfeit or destroy that relationship by what we do or fail to do. Letting our sin teach us what we need to learn is part of the way that God's mercy works. God's goodness is bigger than our badness, and those who know best how little we deserve God's gift of mercy appreciate the gift the most.

If this is the picture of God's joy in receiving a sinner coming home, then it can also give assurance of God's love to those who face death wondering how God will receive them. In the end, we all return home as sinners, so Jesus' parable invites us to trust that God's goodness and mercy will be at least as great as that of a loving human father.

The parable leaves us wondering whether the elder brother joined the celebration. Would you?

I think theology is basically about how-we ordinary folks see God. Is God the amazingly forgiving God of this parable or is God a judge with a list of our good and bad deeds like a divine Santa Claus? If God really is so forgiving as this, what is to prevent us from going astray? How do you think the story ends?

