

## 8.2.2015 Trinity 9: The Prodigal and His Brother

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"Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart. be always acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer." (Psalm 19:14)

We've probably all experienced a Sunday (or maybe even two!) when we come to church, listen to a sermon, and leave thinking: "I didn't get anything out of that sermon – it really didn't apply to my life." So, we never give it another thought. Well, you won't be able to say that today. The sermon this morning applies to everyone. Our focus today is our Gospel reading, the parable of the prodigal son, and as Jesus shares this parable I believe He is saying to all of us, "If you want to know what God is like, if you want to know what your life is like, if you want to know what you are like; then listen to this story."

(Luke 15:1-2) "A certain man had two sons: and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living."

In His first few words, Jesus introduces the cast of characters: A Father and His two sons. The Father in this story represents God, and I would suggest that we are all represented by one of the two sons. We call this parable *The Prodigal Son*, but I don't think Jesus would have given this story that title; for He tells us from the beginning that this man had two sons, and we learn as much about being lost from the older brother as we do from the younger son.

So, the younger son approaches his father and says, “Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.” Can you imagine approaching your parents and saying that? “Mom, Dad, I noticed you’re not dead yet, but I’d like my share now!” It sounds ridiculous, but before you begin to think, “This sermon doesn’t apply to my life” – consider for a moment whose resources you are living on right now. Who has given you everything you have – and how often have you asked God, our Father, for your share? We ask, we receive, and all too often we waste that which He gives so freely.

Now, perhaps the only thing more shocking than the fact that this son has the nerve to ask his father for his portion of the inheritance... is the fact that the father agrees! What kind of parent agrees? This is crazy! The father divides his estate among his two sons, gives the younger everything he asks, and then just lets him leave. As I think about this, it strikes me that there are times when God does the same thing with us. He gives us exactly what we want – to show us that what we desire can’t bring satisfaction. We spend our days chasing after that perfect job, or car, or house, or that big bank account; only to realize that to gain the world – is to lose our soul (Matthew 16:26). The prodigal got exactly what he wanted, but lost what he used to have. That was the beginning of his fall – to claim what he felt was his entitlement – and to separate himself from his family. When we rebel against God’s perfect will for us He sometimes says, “All right, your will be done.” At the end of the day, by claiming what we believe is ours and separating ourselves from Him, we often bring on ourselves the most severe form of punishment – that truth is revealed as the story continues...

(Luke 15:13-16) “And not many days after the younger son gathered

all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.”

The younger son has hit rock bottom. It may not sound repulsive to us, but for a Jew during the time of Jesus, to have a job feeding pigs is to no longer be a Jew! This young man wouldn't even consider eating bacon, now he's taking care of pigs – all as a result of his rebellion. This certainly wasn't what he imagined in his heart (Luke 1:51) when he gathered up his father's money and left for a “far country”.

This “far country” is a place that exists in our hearts as well. Serving God “is perfect freedom”, but so often we see it as bondage. We don't want to follow His every command – so we read the Bible like it's a book of ancient advice. We pick and choose what we will and won't believe, what we will and what we won't apply to our lives. We read passages about love and we're all in – right up until we read that part about loving our enemies. We read about Jesus suffering and dying on a cross for our redemption – and we are His captive audience, until we hear Him say that we must take up our own cross and follow Him. We love those words in Jeremiah (29:11) that say He has plans to give us a hope and a future... as long as that future doesn't look like it did for His first disciples.

To be a child of God is to – by His grace – strive to be faithful to His every command. When we claim our rights, all that we believe is ours, and turn our back on our Father – we discover what the

prodigal son discovered: Sin promises freedom, but it only brings slavery...it promises success, but it only brings failure...it promises life, but "the wages of sin is death." (John 8:34, Romans 6:23)

At this point in our story, the Scripture tells us the prodigal son came to his senses. He said to himself, (Luke 15:17-19) "How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants." In this speech he rehearses there are no demands, no complaining, no blaming his mistakes on someone else; just an honest confession: "I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son..."

It's difficult and painful to face the guilt, shame, and the terrible effects of our sin – how we have hurt those we love and grieved the heart of God (Genesis 6:6), but these are signs of true repentance. This process of conviction allows the son to gain true perspective. As he thinks about home, he realizes his father is loving, generous, and that serving him is perfect freedom. He wants to be subject to the authority of his father (even as a hired servant), because now he can see: To claim our rights is to be lost, and to surrender them is to be found.

And now the moment of truth... His speech is prepared and it's time to go home. So the prodigal son (Luke 15:20a) "arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him..." If you're anything like me and years of your life are marred with sin and failure don't miss the good news found in those words,

because truthfully, the only way to see someone when they're a great way off is to be looking for them. Jesus paints this amazing picture for us of God, sitting on His front porch day after day wondering, "Will today be the day that my child returns?" Day after day it isn't, but God is the God of hope, so He waits and He watches and He waits and He watches... until one day He sees His child on the horizon. Jesus tells us, (Luke 15:20b) "He ran" (God ran!) "and fell on his neck, and kissed him." The son has his speech memorized, but doesn't get the chance to finish it before the Father says to His servants: (Luke 15:22-24) "Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

The father doesn't condemn (John 3:17) or humiliate his wayward son, but with the best robe, a ring, and sandals – he welcomes him home and restores all that was lost. The son's words have moved from "give me what is mine" to "make me one of your own" – so the father does! He has the servants prepare a great feast to celebrate and honor his son. When we return to God, when we stop dreaming of "far away" places, when we "come to our senses" and see that God is good... God is good. It is then that we are truly in His presence, for we are there for the right reasons (not because we have to be, but because we want to be) and it is then that the party truly begins.

That is the story of the prodigal son, and we could stop there, but Jesus didn't. He finishes this parable by telling us about the older son – a son that is truly every bit as lost as the younger once was. It

is perhaps a little more difficult to see, for the older son remained at home, out of trouble, obeyed the rules; but... He is completely self-centered and self-righteous. He considers himself the perfect son and bases this opinion of himself not on how much he loves his father, but on his outward conformity to the laws of his father. Remember his words (Luke 15:29), “These many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment; and yet thou never gavest me...” Outwardly he was obeying his father, but inwardly he too was far from home. He is so focused on his own righteousness and on the sin of his brother, he is completely blinded to the love and generosity of his father.

His brother has just been changed, healed, transformed, and restored; but the older brother doesn't care. In fact, it's clear that his preference would have been for his brother to stay lost – to never return home. He doesn't want a brother. He angrily says to his father (Luke 15:30), “But as soon as this thy son was come...” He refuses to even refer to his brother – as his brother! In this exchange of words, the older brother shows that he has no real love or respect for his father. He lectures him and refuses his request to join in the celebration.

This son believes that he has never transgressed any commandment, yet to love God and to love your neighbor are the first two; and he has certainly broken them both. So how will the father respond to this son? With these comfortable words (Luke 15:31-32), “And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is

found. Imagine the scene as Jesus spoke these words... We are told at the beginning of this chapter that Jesus' audience on that day included publicans and sinners, Pharisees and scribes. From the least religious to the most – He is speaking to everyone and welcomes us all with these words: “All that I have is thine.” God has reached out to the world with all that He has – the life of His Son! His generosity, His grace, and His love are unimaginable and available to all who call on His name (Romans 10:13), but still God our Father leaves it up to each of us to decide if we want to come in and join the celebration.

"To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen." (Jude 1:25)

Thanks be to God for this message! Thanks also to these contributors: Robert Leroe and Carey Nieuwhof