

## GETTING CLOSER TO JESUS THIS LENT

## 3. "When We Are the Prodigal Child"

Luke 15:1-2, 11b-24

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 6, 2016

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I have been preaching a Lenten sermon series on "Getting Closer to Jesus this Lent." The idea was to look at situations which Jesus faced that are similar to situations that you and I face in life. Does Jesus give us a model to follow when we are tempted? We started with Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. We have our own individual wilderness situations when "evil comes a calling." Jesus reacted to the devil and said, No, each time by relying on Hebrew scripture, prayer and a regular worship life which kept him in good communications with God. We might say, "But hey, that was Jesus, wasn't he God's son?" Yes, he is but we are children of God and can follow a model. Two weeks ago we talked about the day some Galileans came to Jesus with the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Jesus told them to not concern themselves with such questions and to worry about their own repentance. Let the tough questions that have no earthly answer to God and take care of your own life.

Today it is the parable of the "prodigal son" or the parable of the "Man who had two sons." The parable is a complicated family situation as many family situations are ... complicated. It is a parable about repentance and forgiveness.

Our bulletin cover this morning has a copy of a painting by Rembrandt. The subject is our sermon, "the return of the prodigal." Rembrandt, a Dutch painter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century painted more pictures of the story of this parable than any other artist. He has drawings and paintings of the younger brother away from home in the midst of riotous living, working in the pig pen, etc. This is the last painting by Rembrandt on the subject. It was painted around 1668/9 near the end of Rembrandt's life when he was broke, having declared bankruptcy three years earlier, having endured the deaths of children, wives and a grandchild. Now in a depression having experienced what the prodigal son had gone through he gives us this last painting depicting the absolute love a father has for his wayward and repentant son. It is thought that the fellow on the back left in the painting is a self-portrait of Rembrandt looking over the shoulder of the forgiving father.

Now to the Bible, the parable begins, "A certain man had two sons" and as is true in most families, the children were different. The scripture only says that one was younger and one was older, but, knowing the story, you can put the rest together. The one was a good son. He had never disobeyed his father. All his life he had done that which was good and honorable and right and proper. He knew his part and played it well. He was the one the father could depend on. If he didn't smile enough, that was all right; after all, he was the worker; he managed the farm. If he was sometimes hard to get along with, it was because he lived so much within himself, and he didn't mix too well in social company. But he was the one who could be trusted. He was no doubt a pillar of the synagogue. People counted on him to get the job done: The elder brother.

The other one, the younger son, was in trouble all the time. Rebellion does not start when one decides to leave home at twenty-one. This boy's life, I think, had been out of control for some time. He could never match his enthusiasm with what the world around him could offer, especially down on the farm. He always wanted his own way, and he probably often got it.

I think of him from six years old and on, seldom listening to his parents and arguing with them all the time about what he was going to do. Running away from home is the price you pay for despair and argument, but it is also the price you pay for individuality. The day came, the Bible says, when he decided to leave. Can't you hear the echo of the argument? "Hey Dad, enough of this; I can't stand your criticism anymore. I don't like the farmer's life. I want to be on my own," so away he went.

But our Lord had a sense of humor: just to prove that times never change that much, before the boy ran away he went to his father to ask him for some money. In those days he was entitled to one-third of the family fortune and the father gave it to him. He took it, converted it to cash, and as the bible says so delicately, went off to a distant land and wasted it away on riotous living.

Dr. Ken Bailey in his book on the parables in Luke says the boy had no right to the money until his father dies. He is in reality wishing his father dead by asking for the money while the father is still alive. "I can't wait until you die," is what the younger son is screaming.

But anyway, with his pockets full of his father's money, he waved good-bye and left, probably for Damascus. Do you ever wonder why he left? You couldn't really blame it on the father. I am sure the father felt guilty, wondering what he had done wrong. The other son stayed home and it wasn't too bad for him. You can't blame it on the mother who isn't even mentioned in the story but who stayed home and did the chores and cooked the meals and made the house a home for all of them. NO, if you are going to blame it on something, you have to blame it on the boy's inner psyche and soul. His life called out for something different than the farm, and away he went—big brave and bold, or so he appeared.

Deep down he wasn't big and brave and bold, and you know it. For behind the façade of every big, brave, courageous, loud-mouthed kid I have ever met there is a little boy who is scared. I think he was frightened by this power that was driving him. And while strutting across the stage he has chosen, he keeps wondering why he's there. He spent all the money.

And to make matters worse, a famine came up and he had to go to work in the fields feeding the pigs. If you have ever lived on a farm you have an understanding as to what that is about. He looked around and as Eugene Peterson translated it in *the Message*, "he was so hungry that he would have eaten the corn cobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any."

That brought him to his senses and headed out for his father's house. The scripture says he rehearsed his lines all the way home. Isn't that the way it is when you have really messed up and you want to say things just right. Have you ever tried to apologize to someone you love? You run the words over and over through your mind and maybe even out loud. "I'm sorry honey, things just got out of control, and one thing led to another and it all escalated, but I'm sorry." "Hey

Dad, I didn't mean to break your rules but I promise not to do it again." You know what I mean, don't you?

He decided to say, "Father I have sinned against heaven and earth and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son, treat me as one of your hired servants." And he rehearsed his lines all the way home.

Homeward bound, he was coming down the road when his dad saw him. If you have ever had a child, you know what it means to have them come home. A child is lost in the world and all of a sudden they come back. And what are you going to tell him, "Hey boy, what are you doing coming back here?" Of course not! Are you going to say, "I told you so, lad the only way to live life is to be dependable." Of course not! What are you going to do even if your son/daughter has never shamed you or done anything wrong when you see them from the top of the hill? You say, "Thank God, he is home." How could a father who prayed for that child every night say anything else? And so they had a party, a big one and almost everybody was happy.

Do you think the father was right? He knew he should be wary—this child had no doubt tricked him previously. He planned to be cautious; put the boy on probation—but he couldn't. He didn't know how to be cautious with his children. He went flat out for them, all the time! So he ran out to meet the boy—outlandish behavior for an ancient Jewish father. First of all a dignified man didn't run; but who cares about dignity if your son is back from the grave of his own misdoing? He didn't let the boy recite his rehearsed speech. He fell upon his neck and kissed him. The father does not know what the boy wants to say or do. And while the father is hugging him he begins his speech, verbatim, word for word ... *no longer worthy to be called your son*, but he never gets to finish it. He never gets to say, "Treat me like one of your hired servants."

No, the father has heard enough already. He will not only be a son again, but a special guest of the house. Put my best robe on him—the "best robe" brings a status of honor. Give him the family ring. Careful father, that ring normally went to the eldest son, who remember is out in the field working the farm so they can eat a fatted calf.

So, they had a party. ...

Now, before we go this morning, I have a question for you. I wonder how many prodigal children we have in the sanctuary today and how many forgiving parents? The parable is telling us that the time comes when each of us comes to the realization that we cannot make it on our own. There comes a time when we have to acknowledge that God is the only resource left who can do anything about it. Our first step back home is the admission we do not have the power to accomplish it, we need the Lord.

Now that will sound personally familiar to some of you within the sound of my voice. You will say, "Yes Rev., I learned that 5, or 10 or 25 years or 6 months ago. I turned it all over to the power and love of God and I have never been the same. But there is a peculiar twist here, even after I decide to head for home, I am still full of ambiguities. Sometimes I feel as if I am still worthless, and as it were, I try to prove it to everybody, even to the Lord, and worst of all to myself. "I keep insisting that I will settle for being a hired servant."

Why? Well, I'm not sure, but whatever the issue here, the addiction to alcohol or fear, anger, discord, criticism and any or all of the rest, I do not feel worthy to let God be my God and Father; nor do I feel worthy to put on his robe, or his ring or the shoes he gives me to shod my aching feet.

I still keep my distance, holding back, rehearsing my excuses. As a hired servant I do not have to accept the responsibilities of a son. I can collect my meager wages at the end of the day and go out to spend them as I choose, so that I have to hire myself out again tomorrow and on all the tomorrows after that.

Are you the prodigal child or the forgiving parent? Do you see yourself being able to accept and offer forgiveness? Or, are you wedded to your work, or your money or your prestige, or your need to be right, that you are jealous when someone else receives God's loving kindness?

God offers to every person the right to come home, to come home in the name of Jesus who came to offer that forgiveness; that wherever we have strayed, Jesus reaches across to us. God's love is there and the father is waiting. Something is said in the parable about the compassionate way in which the father deals with each of his children. And the reason is simpler than we are apt to think: not so much that he chooses to treat them equally, but the longer the father knew those two children, the more he began to understand how much alike they were. The more he thought about it, with all the apparent differences, the more he realized how much they were the same ... for now and evermore. Amen.