

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 5-6, 2016
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

“Prodigal Son(s) or Forgiving Father?”

“**There was a man who had two sons...**” On this Fourth Sunday in Lent, the image before us depicts Jesus’ parable in the Gospel lesson for today. This parable is often referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but I believe that this is misnamed. The focus is not on either the younger prodigal son nor on the older angry son; rather, the focus is on the forgiving father who is central to the message of Jesus’ parable. The image here is from a monumental painting by Rembrandt completed shortly before his death in 1669. The original painting now hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia and it is larger than life – 8 feet by 6 feet. It’s on my “bucket list” to see this in person someday. For now, I have a print of this in my office. It is a reminder to me of what the good news of Jesus is all about and for whom it is intended: those who have wandered far from home and spent their inheritance in “reckless living,” as well as for those who have outwardly done the right and honorable thing, but whose hearts are filled with resentment and anger. The question we must answer is this: who am I in this parable? Luke 15 is a trilogy on lostness as Jesus tells three parables one after the other: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons. That’s right – both sons are lost. One is lost outwardly and obviously; everyone knows about this. But the other is lost inwardly and secretly; only he knows about this. The focus of this marvelous story of grace and redemption is upon the forgiving father, who reaches out to both of his lost sons, welcoming both of them home. The wonderful news is that the sons have a home to go home to – and so do we! And so the message for this day is entitled “Prodigal Son(s) or Forgiving Father?” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

There is much about this parable that is rooted in Middle Eastern culture and *morés*. And unless we understand this background, we won’t really understand the parable, either. Scholar and author Kenneth Bailey spent decades of his life in the Middle East, tracking down the setting and context of Jesus’ parables, so his insights are really helpful. The younger son’s request about wanting his inheritance from his father might strike us as strange, but not terrible. But listen to how this request is understood from a Middle Eastern perspective as Kenneth Bailey tells it: “For over fifteen years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implication of a son’s request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has always been emphatically the same... the conversation runs as follows: Has anyone ever made such a request in your village? Never! Could anyone ever make such a request? Impossible! If anyone ever did, what would happen? His father would beat him, of course! Why? The request means – he wants his father to die” (*Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables*, by Kenneth Bailey. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976 (reprinted 1996), pp. 161-162). With this request, the son has shamed his father. This is a big deal in Middle Eastern culture (and many cultures around the world) where the dynamics of honor and shame play out in daily life. This is very different from the dynamics of guilt-forgiveness that are part of our western perspective. In the parable, the father unbelievably grants his son’s request and likely had to liquidate assets which would have been tied up in property, farmland, and livestock. There are real implications for the rest of the village as they surely felt the pinch of trickle-down economics. Getting what he wants (or what he thinks he wants) the son then goes off somewhere far away to live the life he thinks he wants. We’re told “**he squandered his property in reckless living**” (Luke 15:13). He’s able to do this as long as he has money, but when the money is gone so are his “friends.” He is reduced to almost sub-human status, near starvation, suffering the most degrading thing imaginable for a Hebrew: feeding pigs. He had hit rock bottom, and then it suddenly dawns on him: he can go home! But the way home is very uncertain. He has shamed his father and brought dishonor on his family and village. Would his father even receive him? What if he turns him away? When there is nowhere else to go, we go home. Maybe this is your story: wandering far from home, blowing through your inheritance in reckless living, estranged from family. It is a hard place to be.

The son does go home, and all the way home he rehearses his confession: **“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants”** (Luke 15:18-19). He’s worked out a plan to save face so he can re-enter village life as a hired servant and not a son of the family. He’s not expecting to be received back into the family, but if he becomes a hired servant he will be a free man, and he won’t be under the thumb of his older brother who is going to inherit dad’s estate. Plus he may be able to pay back to his father what he lost. The son is operating from a mindset prominent in rabbinical teaching which held that repentance was primarily a work of man which included reparations or payments for sin. This was what assured a person of God’s favor. All of this flies out the window when the son comes home. We might not think much of the fact that the father **“ran and embraced him and kissed him”** (Luke 15:20), but this is a big deal in Middle Eastern culture. The father deliberately humiliated himself by running out to his son. A Middle Eastern nobleman in flowing robes never runs anywhere. The father does this to protect his son from the hostility of people in the village, and it’s all rooted in this: **“his father saw him and felt compassion”** (Luke 15:20). The father’s compassion for his wayward son moved him to risk humiliation and disgrace. The father who was shamed by his son is now willing to shame himself in order to rescue his son! The son’s rehearsed confession doesn’t even receive a response. Instead, the father begins restoring his son to the family: he calls for the best robe (which would be the father’s own robe reserved for special occasions), a ring (which would be the father’s own signet ring to seal official documents), and shoes (because only servants went barefoot). And ordering the fattened calf to be served up, the father said **“Let’s get this party started!”** Because the father has accepted his son back, the villagers must do the same, even if they do not want to.

Rembrandt’s painting depicts what happened when the son got home. Look at Rembrandt’s painting: light is very important. Notice where the light – on the father and the younger prodigal son who are now reunited. But there is also light over on the older son who is surprised and angry about what is taking place. Between these two pools of light is darkness, and that darkness must be dealt with. The older son is distant and removed from the homecoming. He cannot participate in it because his heart is not in it. The younger son shamed and insulted his father, but now the older son has done the same by refusing to come into the celebration. Middle Eastern protocol dictated that the oldest son be present, moving among the guests, ensuring that all was well. He was to represent his father to the guests. Because the older son will not come in to the feast, the family rift has now been exposed for everyone to see, and so the father again risks shame and disgrace by leaving the celebration to go to his older and very angry son. But who is the son angry with? Not so much his younger brother, but with his father: **“Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours [not “my brother”] came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”** (Luke 15:29-30). What the older son is really saying to his father is this: **“You love him [the younger son] more than you love me!”** And maybe this is your story: dutifully serving but feeling hurt and unappreciated. It is a hard place to be.

You will note that the parable is left unresolved. Does the older son join the celebration? Are the two brothers reconciled? What happens? The ending of the parable remains to be lived out in each of our lives. The forgiving father reaches out to both of his sons who are lost, just as our heavenly Father reaches out to us, no matter where we’ve been or what we’ve done. Whether we are the younger prodigal son or the older angry son, the good news is that our Father comes to us to tell us how much we are loved and to rescue us. Our Father is willing to risk what is most precious to him – the life of his own Son – to do this. Jesus is the other Son who was fully obedient to his Father’s will. He took upon himself all our sins of wayward, reckless disobedience. He took upon himself all of our sins of pent-up anger and resentment. He gave his life for us that we might now come into the Father’s feast as Paul tells us in today’s Epistle lesson: **“For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”** (2 Corinthians 5:21). Amen.