

## Lost and Found

Luke 15:11-32

What are all the layers of meaning we know about the story we call the Prodigal Son? Remember that Jesus told this as the third in a series of three stories. The stories were in response to a situation in which some religious leaders were complaining about Jesus' tolerating the presence of some unsavory people hanging around to hear him teach. They were stories of celebration: a lost sheep recovered, a lost coin found, and a lost son returned home. The Prodigal son is such a familiar story, but are there layers of meaning we miss just because of that familiarity? As you recite this story to yourself, I have a question. What caused the younger son to be destitute in a foreign land?

Author Allan Powell has written a book titled *What Do They Hear?* It seems that there is a between pulpit and pew. You may not have noticed, but sometimes there is small chasm of communication between what's intended by the teacher and what you may actually hear. As I attempt to unpack the meaning in this story, I encourage you to find how and where the story connects with your life.

It seems that there is also a cultural gap in the way different peoples heard stories such as The Prodigal Son. So, why was this younger son starving in a pig pen in a foreign land? In a survey of 100 American seminary students, 94 said that it was because he had wasted his wealth in riotous living. The clear sense is that his lifestyle was evil and that it was a moral failing to squander the money. Most English translations interpret the Greek *asōtōs* with words that imply unhealthiness and immorality in the boy's actions: probably gambling, drinking, and sexual sin. Americans tend to view the Prodigal Son as wicked and sinful. It could just as easily have been interpreted wasteful or extravagant living. Most eastern translations suggest the boy was foolish, but not necessarily wicked. The boy spent too much and didn't save enough.

The survey was extended to fifty seminary students from Russia. In answer to the question why the boy found himself starving in a pigpen, they saw the cause differently. It was because there was *a famine in the land*. The squandered money was a much less important detail. Ironically, most of the American seminarians even remembered the famine as they retold the story. That it even happened was considered an extraneous detail! (Powell, p.14-15)

There were lots of people who had no money, but the famine is what did them in. The boy had been foolish for many reasons. He had left his home, his support system, to go it alone in life. He had regarded his family only as a source of the money he needed to make it on his own. He believed that the money provided the security he needed. Ironically, almost all Americans did not even remember the famine in the retelling of this story. It was deemed this an incidental detail.

Finally, a group of African students from Tanzania were asked the same question. What do you think they saw as the cause of the boy's distress? They saw it in still a different place. The boy was destitute because *no one gave him any food*. It was a wicked culture that failed to practice hospitality toward an immigrant in their midst.

All of us have blind spots sometimes, especially with what is familiar. We don't know what we don't know. But now we are reminded not to limit this story to our familiar understandings, and not to blame the younger son entirely for his own predicament. It's too easy to ignore the larger situation. Many of us in today's climate might find ourselves having spent too much and saved too little. Perhaps we are finding ourselves buffeted by an economic famine. We may be finding it hard to offer and receive hospitality.

Theologian Robert Farrar Capon offers another layer of meaning to this story (*Parables of Grace*). He suggests there are two primary themes in the story: death and parties. The father agrees in effect to die at the beginning of the story. He activates the terms of his will giving the young son a fat living and making the older son owner of the farm. We know that the younger son goes to a foreign land and makes his life one big party. You could say he lived lavishly, foolishly, or wickedly.

But then things fell apart. The money was gone, a famine arrived, and nobody gave him any food. Broke, starving, and reduced to feeding pigs, the son realized that life as he had known it was over. As his father's son, he was as good as dead. But then it occurred to him that he might not be all the way dead. That's when he hatched a scheme to go back home and be taken in as a hired servant.

The boy headed home rehearsing his speech of contrition all the way. As he was coming up the driveway, however, his father saw him and came to greet him with love. "Father," the boy started. "I've sinned against God. I've sinned before you. I don't deserve to be called your son ever again."

"You're right!" thought the father. Then he said, "Kill the fatted calf! Let's have a party. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive ;given up for lost and now found!" The father and son had died to each other, so they had a blowout party right away to celebrate their new life. The fatted calf, now also dead, became the life of the party – a symbol that the father's house was the place to celebrate!

This story seems to tell us that God wants to celebrate and have a great time with all of us. And to this point, it's all good news. The father and his younger son had risen to new life. The fatted calf became the life of the party. And the good times rolled.

Then, the older brother showed up. He was suspicious of all the partying, the waste of time and money. He was also filled with rules and with resentment toward his younger brother whom he believed had gotten away with murder. "So what's with the party? Who's keeping an eye on the farm? Who's minding the store?" The older brother was desperately clinging to the life he knew even if it was not a very happy one. Capon wrote that the other brother "refuses to be dead, frantically trying to hold what passes for his life." (Capon, p.143)

This reminds us of the ones for whose sake this story was told in the first place – those religious leaders were not hospital toward the sinners and tax collectors around Jesus. These religious leaders were clinging to what passed for faith. Then the father spoke a word of judgment to the older son. "Did you forget that I already gave you all I had? It's yours! All I have is yours. I

gave it to you at the beginning of the story! You have all the resources you need to celebrate life any time you want. Do it right now, but don't complain to me." This recalls the words of the poet W.H. Auden: "God may reduce you to tears on Judgment Day reciting by heart the poems you would have written had your life been good."

So, where is the space in this story for each of us to find meaning? It doesn't really matter if you blame the younger son for his wicked lifestyle or even for just for being a foolish victim of famine. It's not important to blame that distant country for being inhospitable. We don't even need to blame the older brother for being mired in a miserable but familiar life – out of touch with all the resources at his disposal. None of these things matter unless they keep us clinging to a way of living that keeps us clinging and grasping for things that don't really satisfy.

If you see yourself in that son, what matters is that you recognize the path to new life is dying to self and being home with God. And home is not somewhere is not somewhere beyond, but right here and now. Home is being with God who just can't wait to celebrate you. If you see yourself as the older brother, full of rules and bitterness, you need to see the opportunity present in God's invitation to be home, to celebrate who you are. God invites you to let go trying to justify the rules and the judgment. Let go the overwhelming weight of resentment and bitterness you feel toward that younger brother – how unfair it feels that his homecoming is being celebrated. Learn that God longs to celebrate with you as well.

That celebration is already going on – eternally going on. It may be that all we need to do is become aware of it. That is the invitation – to wake up to the celebration of you already taking place in the mind and the heart of God. What a difference it will make in your life. In Jesus' name, what a difference you will make in the lives of others!