

Sunday, July 29, 2018

Psalm 34 (761 VU)

Luke 15:11-32

Who are the Prodigals Today?

It is great to be able to continue to share our "At Your Request" series for the summer with today's focus Jesus' parable of the "prodigal son" as found in Luke 15. This parable is somewhat tied to other selected topics for our summer series by dreams and the thought processes one might have because of life's everyday experiences. But what about dreams? Do they stop occurring when we get older or is there something about having and remembering our dreams which leads us to further learning and experience? Do our dreams and thoughts while we sleep make a difference and what do these really mean?

We might also ask what Jesus' purpose was in teaching this story. but if we read all of Luke 15 we actually have 3 parables referring to losses. The lost sheep, the lost coin and this parable often called the prodigal son, is also known as the lost son.

Jesus is teaching and those listening are a diverse group- tax collectors and 'sinners' as well as the Pharisees who hear Jesus and see what he is doing. They mock him and try to insult him as they mutter loud enough to be heard: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them". It is precisely because of this 'sinner' term that Jesus responds by telling these 3 parables of lost and found.

We must remember that these parables are stories unto themselves, without a need for interpretation, and they reflect life at that time but in so many ways also reflect today's world with extravagance, sinful living and beginning anew. Yet we see that these "lost" teachings are still very relevant today because these parables have been often interpreted and become the basis of songs, movies and books. The Rolling Stones, Iron Maiden, Kid Rock, Dierks Bentley have all recorded songs about this demanding young man who wants what is owed to him so that he can leave the comfort of home and live life on his terms all alone. Like Edmund in the "Lion, Witch and Wardrobe", the young man is lured with dreams of power and influence which he will never have if he stays on the farm with his dad. But Edmund learns the hard way that no amount of Turkish delight is worth the cost of his life. Yet we might wonder is this all there is?

This same theme of a young person getting what they are entitled to now plays a key role in Tim Burton's Batman and even in Iron Man. But this theme is not new as Shakespeare also wrote about it in "The Merchant of Venice". Yet as we reflect on this story we might ask

ourselves which son are we like or would like to be even for a short time? And would others care about us and want us to return to them again?

Jesus tells the story of the lost sheep where one of the 100 sheep being cared for by the shepherd is lost. One is lost and so he leaves the other 99 to find it. Upon successfully finding the sheep, he carries the sheep on his shoulders, calls his friends and rejoices. Jesus then tells the story of the woman who like many of his listeners was not wealthy. Every coin in their purse mattered. It was worth it for her to burn the lantern at night, and sweep out her home in order to find the coin which was lost. Her neighbours and friends would notice the light burning and wonder what was wrong but when she went to them to tell them that she found the lost money, she tells them to rejoice with her.

In this third parable a farming family are described as a father with two sons. There are probably others- mother, sisters, servants, hired hands, and maidservants too. But the focus is on two sons. The younger son is often the one most talked about but the two siblings are quite similar. Both are self-absorbed, both chose estrangement from those who loved them and neither fully respected their father or each other. Yet it is the father who remained devoted to each child and never condemned their behaviour. The father loved his children enough to allow them the freedom to make their own decisions. His attitude toward them was not determined by their character, but his.

The story proceeds with the younger son demanding that the father 'give him his share of the estate.' This behaviour was unheard of at the time of Jesus' teaching but he granted his child's request. He executed his will before his death so that the younger son would be able to fulfill his dream of getting away from the farm and travelling to a foreign country. Why did he want to leave? Perhaps the young man wanted to cut loose from the generational tradition, be freed from what was familiar or communal. He just needed to get away both geographically and psychologically. But by asking for what his portion the younger son's request was definitely selfish and self-seeking.

He did not think beyond his desires and immediate needs. After all, who would look after his parents in their old age? What about his sisters- who would look after their needs until they married? When he asked for the money all he dreamed about was getting off the farm and the big city.

Many people today want what they feel entitled to- not just the younger generations but even those who say we've worked for it, we have been on the margins for so long, what more

do we need to say and do to get what is due to us? But who pays the price of this entitlement of what is due or even who decides? Who are the prodigals today? Who are the ones who are wastefully extravagant and don't care about anyone but themselves?

The story continues. In only a few words, the younger son left for a distant country and there "squandered his wealth in wild living," or "wild, riotous living" or lived a 'life of debauchery' depending upon the translation you consult. We do not know how he spent his money but it was wasteful. Was it the latest fashions, toys, fame, possessions, the joy of freedom, self-indulgence- mainly there was too little regard for love, family and faith. The young man went from one way of life to the extreme opposite and paid the price because in time, he lost all his wealth and most of all he lost his identity, that is who he really was. In order to meet his basic needs- food shelter and clothing he had to hire himself out to a citizen of that country and the young man's job was to look after and feed his pigs. The food he gave the pigs was better than the food he could afford to buy for himself.

One day however, the young man 'came to his senses' or in other words, woke up and realized where he was and what he was doing. He looked in the mirror and did not like what he saw. Here this young Hebrew/Jewish man was now working in a Gentile employer's pigsty. The lowest level this young man could go. Yet Jesus in telling the story does not leave him there. The young man takes inventory of his life- his options were to die or to return to his father; he was destitute and maybe because of moral remorse he needs to go home. Thinking logically, he was even hoping to be employed as a hired hand in his father's farm for at least then he would not have to eat worse than pigs, but also have respect as a wage earner.

Who are the prodigals today? People hoping to live a good life and yet are in the streets. People who through no fault of their own are left to search for mission support without a future. Or even people who once lived in extravagance now living on the margins because of their life experiences and poor choices. Or even those whom we know but live far beyond their means, credit cards maxed out with only 60 years to pay them off. In order to keep up appearances—the house, the car, the clothes etc, credit is the only means to stay alive. Bankruptcy would be failure and this is not an option. They are entitled to it, aren't they?

When the young man decides to go home he plays it over and over again what he will say—"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men."

Meanwhile, back at home, life has continued as it was before with the older son taking on the burden of tasks under the loving eyes of the father. Yet the father is mourning his lost son and as a faithful man is hoping that someday he will look up and see him walking down the driveway. The brother is focused on the needed tasks and now has to work harder and hired more people to do the work he cannot do all because his brother wanted to live a good life!

One day the father looks up and he could see far in the distance the younger son was making his way home. The father runs out to meet him throws his arms around him and kisses him. No one has said a word. But the father is embracing him with love.

Rembrandt's painting "The Return of the Prodigal Son" highlights this moment. Rembrandt's depiction is not outside but in the house with everyone around them. The mother is in the shadows to the left, a maidservant is in the background with a wash basin and water ready to see him clean again, the older son dressed in similar fine clothes to the father is sitting disgustedly and the younger son has his chest upon his father.

Rembrandt's depiction of the embrace is unique because the hands of the father are very different—the one on the left- appears slightly smaller and softer looking compared to the larger hand on the right; Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Theologian interprets this embrace as "not only a father who clasps his on in his arms, but also a mother who caresses her child and surround him with the warmth of her body and holds him against the womb from which he sprang."

This loving father is Jesus' new vision of God, not a vengeful punishing person, but a tender consoling adult. In this reunion, the son becomes the return to God's origin of being. Upon hearing this story those listening to him would wonder and state, why should the father be so kind? And then he tells the household staff to go and get ready for a feast, his son is home. It is time to rejoice. The lost is found—a similar theme to the lost sheep and coin.

But this parable does not end there. The focus then shifts to the field where the older son is completing his work, hears noise coming from the house and wonders what is happening. This brother has not stated anything at all. The silence he kept revealed greed and hypocrisy, from the beginning. As the older son he would have received double portion of the estate and when the brother took off he received it all, but should not he have said and done something to prevent the loss? Was he being as selfish as the younger brother who took what he was entitled to and left? Both the sons had desires for wealth when in fact it was their father's to give away. But he said nothing, until the younger brother returned. He found his voice and his contempt was clear as he spoke to his father.

There were no formal Dad, or calling his brother by his name, but merely referred to him, as your son. He refused to join the party and failed to even be a gracious host for his brother's return. He was angry, spoke harshly and compared his father's choices to the younger son. But now the brother was put in his father's robe- a garment of honour, given a signet ring symbolizing his return to the family and sandals for his feet. He would not serve as a slave but would be a master to others. This younger son was fully reclothed, forgiven and restored to the status of a beloved son. The older brother did not agree and was livid!

How often have we called out that it's not fair—when we work so hard and others get things handed to them, or it's not fair when we think we have been wronged and not called to lead, or it's not fair when we've lived the best life and others lived loosely and yet are forgiven-too? Will we ever get what is right?

The younger man had resolved to go home and become a slave, yet it is the words of the older son who reveals the mind of a slave rather than the master of the estate. Imagine the Pharisees seeing themselves in this story—they obeyed God, kept the rules of the house, served diligently but without love, appreciation or gratefulness. They grumbled about generosity showered on the unworthy, they were bitter, resented Jesus' words. How could the younger man be treated like this? He should have been punished, made to feel remorse, shame, sorrow, but instead there is feasting and rejoicing.

This parable teaches a new portrait of God. A gracious father, with boundless love and pardon, who calls all his children—prodigals, righteous, sinners, saints, worthy or not—to embrace one another in a celebration of being one with each other in Christ. The father in this story- broke all the molds of what was standard and acceptable. Who gives their younger son what he believes to be his—entitlement? Who watches and prays for their return each day? Who says nothing until love is shown and happiness is expressed? What kind of parent says it is necessary to have a party—a celebration expressing joy in the reality that the one who was dead is alive. It is compassion for the lost that brings about life. There is strong embracing and acceptance. And there is hope- the older son knows that he will inherit everything. But they had to celebrate—because his mourning had turned to joy. Like the sheep and the coin- the young man was found and carried home, the lights were turned on and there was celebrating.

The younger son did not dream that this would be possible yet it is Jesus' story which leads us to ask what does this mean for us? The younger son is given the freedom to choose life and yet when he wanders away from what he has been taught he realizes that he can only

be a better person with his family and the teachings of God to follow. He returns home to become a hired hand, this was the cost for his sins. Yet the father welcomes him, and lifts him up.. he was lost and is found. His dream to be a hired hand changed to being one in leadership because of the father's extravagant love. Something he could not even think was possible.

Max Lucado's ideas of the prodigal son is the difference between mercy and grace.

Mercy gave the prodigal son a second chance. Grace gave him a feast.

What about the prodigals today? Sometimes and maybe even often we might be included along with the prodigals today—when we want our fair share now, when we live extravagantly at the cost of another, and when we dream of being better than others. To whom do we or they return? Do we/they have much choice or even a chance? God is calling everyone to him no matter what you have done and says come here, come home. Are we willing to start anew? The younger son came to his senses and dreamed of becoming a hired hand. Yet what awaited him was more than a dream—his loving father embraced and welcomed him. This same embrace and welcome awaits each of us if we turn to God and renew our faith. But we must have faith and believe in God and with this, there is no condemnation, but forgiveness. Thanks be to God!