

21 July 2024 Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Muskegon, MI
Tom Wagner, “The Prodigal Son” Luke 15:11-32

My **three-year sojourn between college to seminary** included nearly a year working as a hired hand on a hog farm while living with friends. This was about an hour’s drive from my parents’ home. At the time I was paying off a modest undergraduate debt, which seemed like a responsible course of action before moving on to graduate school. Yet, that didn’t stop my **Grandpa Wagner** from making a tongue-in-cheek reference to the parable of The Prodigal Son. I accepted the comment in the good humor with which it was given. Grandpa had been supportive of my academic endeavors but was slightly disappointed when my vocational sights shifted from law to theology. Seriously, there are points at which I can **identify with both sons** from today’s parable. Having now lived nearly 40 years at a great distance from my extended family I am aware that even when living in “a far country” has been freely chosen, it comes with costs. Also, as a first-born child, I understand the older son’s judgment of younger siblings’ choices. Despite geographic distance and occasional disagreements, I generally have seen my life as a natural extension of my parents’ values.

I share those biographical notes, because author **Henri Nouwen** (1932-1996) in his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (1992) wove together personal experience with biblical exegesis in his book length exploration of the story. **Rembrandt’s painting**, also called “The Return of the Prodigal Son” initially inspired his meditations. While I had been aware of Nouwen through magazine articles and brief quotes, the book was new to me. I thank this morning’s tech master, Kal Fox for suggesting the sermon topic and loaning me her copy. This morning, I plan to look at the broader **literary context of the parable before discussing the plot and three characters**. Much of what I will share is inspired by Nouwen

The parable traditionally titled “the Prodigal Son” is found only in the Gospel According to Luke. The third gospel is the first volume of a two-volume work by the same author. The Acts of the Apostles is the second installment. As you may recall from my past sermons, each gospel presents the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth from a different perspective. While Mark reports him as a man of action, Matthew presents of him as the long-awaited messiah. John speaks of him as the man from above. **Luke presents Jesus as a universal figure**, connecting the life of the Palestinian Jew with the broader context of the Roman Empire. One example of this is the way the author uses the reigns of emperors Augustus and Tiberius as time signatures. Luke also focuses more on the social justice themes in Jesus’ teachings than the other gospels.

What is a parable? It is a metaphor told in story form, usually drawn from nature or human relationships. Some, like “the mustard seed” are short similes. Others like the Prodigal Son have a longer narrative, much like Aesop’s Fables. Jesus understood that telling a good story was often a better way of teaching than making direct pronouncements. During my seminary days we would have called this “narrative theology”.

In **Luke’s 15th chapter**, Jesus and his followers are on the final journey to Jerusalem. He responds to criticism from Pharisees concerning his open association with tax collectors and other “sinners” by **telling a series of three lost and found stories**: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. While the Gospels often depict the **Pharisees** in opposition to Jesus (as in this episode), they were **likely closer to Jesus’ positions than is commonly thought**. They were more liberal than the aristocratic Sadducees, applying scriptures to daily life and open to new understandings of the text. Most of them operated in rural Synagogues. Though they were at odds with the ruling establishment in Jerusalem, they were also critical of common folk who they considered careless concerning ritual purity and tithing. Luke’s gospel portrays the Pharisees more sympathetically than the others. Back in Ch. 13, they warn Jesus that Herod seeks to kill him. Later in Ch. 19 during the entry into Jerusalem they beg him to silence the adoring crowd, likely fearing a lethal response from Roman officials. Though these episodes can be read as menacing threats, they can also be read as sincere expressions of concern.

Curiously, the word “**prodigal**” never appears in the text of the story, though it does describe the younger son’s reckless spending in the far country. In keeping with the other parables in the chapter, a better title is “**the lost son**” or even plural, “**the lost sons**”. In the first story the owner of 100 **sheep** leaves 99 of them to search for

one lost sheep. Once he finds the lost sheep and returns home, he is so happy he must tell his neighbors. In the second story a woman with 10 silver **coins** loses one. Each coin (drachma) was worth a day's wage. She thoroughly searches the house until she finds it, and then shares her joy with her neighbors.

The plot of our **third parable** is more complicated, involving the actions of three characters: the younger son, the elder son and the father. It also seems like a more direct response to the Pharisees' critique. The younger son requests or perhaps demands his **share of his father's estate**. Nouwen and most commentators consider this request both audacious and insulting. While a father might designate how his estate would eventually be divided among the heirs and turn over the day-to-day management, he still had the right to live on those assets during his lifetime. In this case the younger son was **essentially wishing his father dead**, especially when he gathers his belongings and travels to a far country. He is breaking all ties with home. He disowns family in a culture where multigenerational households were the norm.

In the far country he squanders his inheritance to nothing. Adding to his difficulties, his poverty occurs when the far country is experiencing a famine. In desperation the young man hires himself out to a local farmer who has him feed pigs. Even this degrading work doesn't solve his basic need for food. The pig feed starts to look appetizing.

At this low point, **the younger son comes to his senses**. He remembers that even his father's hired servants have more than enough to eat. He resolves to return home, apologize to his father for his insulting behavior and beg to be taken back into the household, not as a son, but as a hired hand. As the son approaches home, his **father sees him from a distance and with compassion rushes out to greet him**. Rembrandt's painting captures the moment of the reunion as the father embraces the ragged, weary and penitent son.

The father is so overjoyed at the younger son's return that he **interrupts the apology**, ordering his slaves to bring the best robe, a ring and sandals. These items **confirm the son's restored status** in the household. Despite the young man's past behavior, the father has continued to recognize him as a son, an heir and full member of the family, not relegated to a second-class position among the domestic staff. Not only is food set before the starving returnee, but the father orders a feast of celebration with music and dancing for the entire household. Slaughtering the fatted calf emphasizes the specialness of this event. By his own choice this son had disowned his family. Ironically in treating his father as if he were dead, he himself had become dead to the family. **His return is rightly treated as a resurrection**, good reason for an over-the-top expression of joy.

Curiously, at this point Nouwen draws **parallels between the life of Jesus and the younger son** of the parable. It's not a common interpretation, but very similar to reflections found in a **lengthy footnote in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics IV.2**. Though Barth's thoughts appeared in print 34 years before Nouwen's book, they appear to have come to those thoughts independently. In this sense **Jesus renounced the privileges of divinity to make common cause with humanity**—living in our skin and walking in our shoes. In this far country he humbled himself to the point of death. His return home was a moment of exaltation and opened the door to recognizing **we too are sons and daughters of God**, fellow heirs in the original goodness of creation.

As an Anabaptist I venture to add a collectivist layer to this line of reasoning. In leaving for the far country the younger son made an individual choice to **cut off all ties to community**. When he ran out of resources there were **no community structures to support him**. The return home was also an **acceptance of his responsibilities** for the common good. Another way of thinking of the incarnation is the mystical sense in which Christians speak of being the body of Christ. **Returning home and recognizing our responsibility to community, that identity is at once flesh and blood, here and now and collective**. Our return home and recognizing responsibility for society is not as some would have it, forcing our beliefs and opinions on others. It is not a platform for self-aggrandizement and self-righteousness. It is a joining together for mutual aid recognizing that each one of us can contribute to common good. Some have an abundance of material resources to share. Others may have depths of spiritual wisdom. Others can organize and bring people together. Still

others have the practical skills that keep folks fed, clothed and sheltered. It is an agenda for acceptance and welcoming of all people.

Returning to our narrative, **the elder son** was out in the field when his brother arrived. When the sounds of celebration reached his ears, he asked one of the slaves what was going on. The slave informs him that his little brother has returned home, and their father had organized a party for the occasion. Infuriated by the news the elder son refuses to join the celebration. Just as the father had gone out to welcome the younger son earlier, he goes out to the older son to convince him to **come and join the festivities**. The son complains to his father that he has worked for him like a slave and never disobeyed his orders, yet he never was given even a goat to host a party with his friends. He resents being taken for granted, while his little brother had left home and wasted his portion of the estate on a wild lifestyle. The older son can't even bring himself to acknowledge his relationship with his brother but refers to him as "**your son**". This older son has now separated himself from family and household. It is the father who makes the effort to bring him back into the relationship. In his final argument the father acknowledges "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." He goes on, "It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found." Notice that the father makes a point to refer to the younger son as "**your brother**". The story ends there. Though we do not know if the elder son decided to join the party, we do know that the father loved both sons and wished to restore the relationship between his children.

As you may have noted, **Rembrandt** took some artistic license portraying the text in his painting. **Light focuses on the father and returning son**, especially the father's hands, but four other figures appear along with them in the shadows. The tall man to our right may likely be the elder brother, though in the story he was not present during his brother's arrival. Neither does he appear as one who has worked in the field all day. He does appear distant from the embrace of the father and looks down on the two men in judgment. It isn't clear who the three additional bystanders are, possibly servants or neighbors. Yet their gaze focuses on **the father's hands** as embraces his son. Nouwen noticed differences in these hands. The left hand (the father's left) "is strong and muscular" with a firm grasp of the son's shoulder. He describes the left hand as "refined, soft and very tender" "it lies gently upon the son's shoulder". **In the father are both paternal and maternal attributes**. Since the father in the story has usually been interpreted as reflecting God's love, it seems remarkable that a 17th century artist would depict that love with the characteristics of both genders. There is precedent for this in the biblical text, though the feminine metaphors often get ignored.

In mediating on this parable, I have considered the roles of three characters: the younger son, the elder son and the father. Remember that Jesus told this story and two others in response to criticism from the Pharisees for hanging out with a disreputable crowd. For sure the prodigal who went to a far country, the lost son applies to these associates. Yet it could apply to Jesus due to his association with them, at least in the eyes of the critics. The attitudes of the Pharisees are reflected in the response of the elder brother. He too is lost in his resentment. These were not cold heartless people. They were passionate about their faith, but they were obsessed with perfection. Perhaps it's like the old Tolstoy quote, "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself." The father, representing God, embodies compassion, forgiveness and love. He loves both sons and seeks their reconciliation. I think we all recognize those times we are like either the younger son or the older son. Nouwen suggests **our challenge is to become compassionate and generous as the father**. I think he is on to something. Though Jesus was known for some harsh rhetoric against his opponents, in this case he seemed **less concerned with returning criticism and more about changing behavior and attitudes**.

May we do likewise.

Notes

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV. 2. (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1958)

Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, (NY: Doubleday, 1992)

Dan Otto Via, Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1967)