

Sunday July 18, 2010

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BRINGING HOME THE PRODIGALS

The story we are going to re-examine today has been called the greatest short story in the world. Although the story of the prodigal son was first told by Jesus over 2000 years ago, the story still plays out in homes all across our country every day. Perhaps today, this story is taking place in your home, with your family or with your friends. Few homes are exempt from the kind of pain experienced when children and other loved ones make terrible choices that lead them down a path that is far from God.

No matter how godly a family may be and how effective parents are at teaching their children Christian principles there are no homes that are immune from experiencing the pain that comes from family members who have strayed far from God. When you know a close friend or family member is not walking with God you never feel quite right or at peace.

Or maybe you don't have a child that is wayward. In fact, maybe it is your parent who has wandered far from God. Maybe your mom or dad is experiencing some latent rebellion or experiencing the culmination of their unattended to dysfunction and their life is a mess. That is a different kind of pain that requires reversed roles.

Maybe you have a brother or a sister who used to attend church with you, maybe they were even baptized, but now they are cold as ice toward the ways of God.

Certainly all of us have friends and acquaintances that at one time seemed interested in pursuing life with God but now they are far, far away from him.

And no doubt, probably there are many people in this room who may be tracking well with God now, but in years past embraced a life of rebellion. Maybe some of us did things that we would be horrified to talk openly about today.

That is why this quintessential story of Jesus is so compelling. It touches each of us in a variety of ways. Every person on planet earth can relate in some way. But what is also so compelling about this story is the father's unconditional love and grace. This is a story of a boy who broke his father's heart, but nonetheless, the father loved the boy deeply and never ever gave up hope. That image stirs something deep within each of us.

So this morning I invite you to reflect for a few moments on how this story impacts you. Now please do not miss the obvious because of familiarity.



Henri Nouwen was careful with this, and as many of you know, sat in front of Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal son for days contemplating the various implications.

Just like you would gaze at a **diamond** from several different angles to observe its beauty, I would encourage you to see this story as a beautiful diamond that presents different images as you turn it and allow the light to catch the edges. Maybe even pray right now that God would help you see something new in this passage from the Bible.

Let's watch this video to see how this story may be played out in modern times.

VIDEO CLIP

What I would like to do in the next few moments is guide us in reflection around 4 questions. Starting with this one:

1. Who are the prodigals?

In answer to this question one need look no farther than their own heart. Any honest person understands their propensity to wander away from God and engage in attitudes and actions that are contrary to the truth of God.

Genesis 6:5 The LORD saw how great humankind's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil all the time.

That old hymn got it right when it said "prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the one I love". We all have a natural propensity to engage in self centered behaviours that lead us far away from God.

Or we could say...We have met the prodigal and it is us! Hi, my name is Laird and I am a prodigal!

But here is another thing to consider. In some cases we have made prodigals out of those who were never severely prodigal in the first place. Some Christian families and churches are characterized by legalism. We judge others by our own set of extra-Biblical standards and ostracize those who don't conform to the party line. Many people have not rebelled against God, but rather rebelled against a legalistic Christian environment.

One elderly lady in one of our pastorates came back to church after a 55 year hiatus. She left the church at age 21 because someone criticized her for wearing make-up and as a result she was ostracized from participating in a music ministry she loved... all because of a little lipstick. Was she a prodigal? No, but the church had labeled her as one and made her feel like she was one. She came back to God and was baptized at age 76!

When we make our preferences seem like rock solid truth we inadvertently create prodigals and push people away from God rather than draw them to him.

This is nothing new. Jesus was considered a prodigal by the religious establishment of his day. In fact, this story in Luke 15 is told in response to the Pharisee's criticism of Jesus eating and socializing with sinners.

But think about this... sometimes there are prodigals that are quite at home in the church. They know the lingo and the rituals and they go through the motions – pray here, sing now, say amen this way, put your left foot in put your left foot out... No one thinks of them being

far from God because they do and say all the right stuff but often their hearts are very far from God.

Who is more of a prodigal, the one sitting in the bar or the one sitting in a church service? Both could be and if so, both need to come home to God in repentance. Maybe that describes you today. Yes this rebellion is not as easy to see but it is there nonetheless.

In Jesus' story what brought the boy to his senses was that he had come to the end of his rope and despaired. Many of us who have grown up in the church have never known that kind of despair.

Jesus elaborates on this situation in his dealing with a prodigal woman who was most likely engaged in prostitution.

Luke 7:36-47

³⁶Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, ³⁸and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

³⁹When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

⁴⁰Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

⁴¹"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii and the other fifty. ⁴²Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

⁴³Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

⁴⁴Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

Perhaps many of us in the church love little because we don't have a sense of being forgiven of much. Now that doesn't mean we go out there and get drunk and do drugs and rob banks so that we can have a sense of being forgiven much. But the reality is that if we have sinned in one point of the law we are guilty of breaking the whole law. We are all profoundly guilty and have missed God's target of holiness, but often when immersed in the Christian culture we sometimes don't **feel** that we are as misguided as we possibly are.

But let's turn the diamond again, here is another important question:

2. Why is the picture of the father so compelling?

You have to admit he is the centerpiece of the whole story. We are drawn to him for several reasons.

- He does not seek to control his son, but allows the boy to make his own decisions.
- He never loses his hope for the boy and assumes the son will one day return.
- When the boy does come home he does not judge but rather throws a party.
- But I think we are drawn to him simply because of the deep concern he has for his son. He knows his son is in enemy territory and will incur wounds inflicted by others and even self inflicted wounds. This creates a deep sense of angst for him and a constant yearning for his son to come home.

It is hard for us to really identify with this angst and yearning of the father. And if you have never had a prodigal family member you may not identify with that sense of angst. This yearning is beyond cognition and deeply penetrates the emotion.

One of the most moving songs I know is the song “Bring him home”, the song sung by Jean Val Jean, in the musical, Les Miserable. This song captures this same spirit. Although singing about a son-in-law who is going off to war, this song has helped me understand the deep emotion of the father’s love for a wayward person.

Let’s listen to this song now and hear the heart of the father.

Song: Bring Him Home

Of course the father in this story is representative of God the father and reflects God’s heartfelt feelings for all of us as his children. And this father character reminds us that even when we are messing up big time, God meets us with grace and compassion. Every time you and I wander away from God his heart yearns for us to come home. There is nothing good we can do to get God to love us more. There is nothing bad we can do to cause God to love us less. His love and grace truly are amazing.

Now being gracious with those who have messed up does not mean that we go soft on speaking the truth. Truth needs to be spoken. In fact, to be truly gracious involves speaking the truth. Grace and truth are like two sides of the same coin. You can’t have one without the other. Most of us go to one extreme at the expense of the other as we respond to prodigal behaviour. We need to give people what they don’t deserve and make it easy for them to turn back to God. But we also need to help prodigals embrace God’s truth on the matter, and that might require some hard conversations that may need the help of a Christian counselor. We will never regret telling the truth. We may regret how we tell the truth and when we tell the truth. But we will never regret telling the truth – because after all as Jesus said, it is the truth that sets people free. But timing is so important. One notable thing about this story is that truth didn’t come before the party. The elder brother wanted the order reversed. But the father embraced his son with open arms first, and then presumably helped his son process God’s truth in the weeks to follow.

God the father perfectly balances grace and truth. In 3rd John verse 4, John the first century church leader captures this longing of God the father when he says; “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3rd John verse 4).

When we walk toward the truth - God experiences joy. When we walk away from the truth - God experiences sorrow.

Today, God is saying to his wayward children, both here in this room and out there in the community – “come home, please come home and walk in my truth”.

Now, let’s turn the diamond again. If you have a prodigal in your life this next question quickly emerges:

3. How should I react to the prodigals in my life?

When I talk with people about their prodigal family members or close friends, they often tearfully ask me; *How should I treat them?* This is an important question because often the offence they have committed is not only against God but also against us. They have hurt us deeply and we ourselves are wounded.

Four responses come to my mind.

- **We are to treat prodigals with forgiveness.**

As C.S Lewis said, - “Forgiveness is a beautiful word until you have something to forgive”. Yet, Colossians 3:13 tells us to “forgive as the Lord has forgiven you”. Which raises a good question – how has God forgiven us? Did God make us clean up our act and recite our repentance 77 times and beg for mercy? No, when we simply acknowledged our waywardness and wrongdoing, ***even if we couldn’t put it into words***, his forgiveness rushed in and cleansed us. That of course is the truth behind **1 John 1:9** which says,

⁹If we confess our sins (if we admit we have done wrong), he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

It becomes easier to forgive others when we review our own forgiveness.

And our forgiveness toward prodigals can often be a powerful catalyst for them to receive God’s forgiveness. They can understand God’s forgiveness better when they see a human example.

But granting forgiveness to prodigals who have hurt us is complex and might require us to talk with a Christian counselor or a mature Christian friend. I like what Lewis Smedes says about How we go about forgiving.

(Concepts by Lewis Smedes - Forgive and Forget)

Slowly - With a little understanding - In confusion - With anger left over - A little at a time - Freely or not at all - In remembrance of our own forgiveness.

We treat them with forgiveness, but also,

- **With a spirit of self reflection**

Could it be that something we did or did not do has been a factor in that person becoming a prodigal? Now it is important for us to distinguish between real and false guilt. But people seldom rebel in isolation. There are always causes to the effects. Can you imagine the impact of a mom or dad that apologizes to a prodigal child for ways in which they dropped the spiritual ball at home and lived hypocritically? Imagine the impact of a friend who apologizes to a prodigal for not caring for them when they needed it most. Imagine the shock on the face

of a prodigal mom or dad, when their child apologizes for their contribution for their parent's dysfunction – man that would really mess with their head!

What would happen if you called someone who had hurt you and said – “I know we have had our differences and have chosen different paths, but I want you to know I love you and that my door is always open”.

I guess the point is this – people seldom become prodigals in isolation. Relationships are like a mobile, and everything we do, or don't do, has an affect on others that are close to us. A catalyst for a prodigal to return may be our humble expressions of owning our part in their rebellion and apologizing for that.

But we also need to treat prodigals...

- **With an awareness that they are still in progress.**

When a prodigal comes home will they be perfect? Hardly! Let's not expect dramatic changes. But... Pray that when they do come home they meet the father first and not the older brother. The elder brother will say – hey, I can still smell the tobacco, pot and alcohol on you. Look at you. You are a mess. Clean yourself up first before you even think of coming home.

But the father is patient and knows that the boy will still smell like the pig sty. The father doesn't ask the boy to clean himself up first. He is just glad the boy has returned and wraps his arms around him, smell and all.

The spirit of the elder brother in us or others can repel the prodigal, even if they want to come home. When the father's house is filled with the fathers love, then the prodigals may want to come home.

But we also need to treat them...

- **With constant hope**

A priest tells this story –

In a village near here, is a large old house. An elderly lady lives there alone and every night, as darkness falls, she puts a light on in the attic. Her son left home 25 years ago, rather like the prodigal in the parable, but she has never given up the hope that one day he will come home. We all know the house well, and although the bulb must occasionally need replacing, none of us have ever seen that house without a light on. It is for her son.

I was speaking at a Men's retreat at Rockridge, a Young Life Camp in BC. I had made the comment about a person I knew who was a prodigal of prodigals and made some comment about how his situation seemed hopeless. As soon as I finished speaking this 30 something guy, who looked like he just walked out of a muscle magazine ran up to me. His voice was shaky but he looked me in the eye and said – Laird, never lose hope for that prodigal! He told me that he was a drug addict, involved in a life of crime and on evenings he was a male stripper. But with tears in his eyes he told me of how God got a hold of his life and completely transformed him and here he was today at a Christian men's retreat studying the Bible. The he looked at me again and said – never lose hope!

Prodigals often feel that they don't belong. The prodigals in our lives need us to leave a light on for them, so they know that we want them as part of our family and that they do in fact belong.

SONG - I Belong

One last turn of the diamond.

4. As I wait for my prodigal to return, what am I to do?

Waiting is hard. As we wait for our prodigals to come home, it seems like there is nothing we can do. But there is. Let me suggest two things.

- **Plan the party.**

Assume that one day the prodigal will come to their senses and return home. And imagine the kind of party you will throw to celebrate their return. It may be a small affair or a big blast but plan the party. Think of how you can celebrate in a way that doesn't embarrass the returning prodigal, but in a way that does praise God for bringing home the prodigal. That might be at their baptism one day, or at a special holiday.

- **Never stop praying**

The older I get the less I understand about prayer. But I am learning that prayer is a vital part of bringing home the prodigals. That is what the father in this story must have been doing as each day his eye surveyed the horizon looking for his son's return. Lord, bring him home.

Lord please bring my (son, daughter, mom, dad, sister brother, husband, wife, relative, friend)... home. Nothing fancy, just remembering them to God and entrusting them to him. That may seem like it is passive, but in reality it is the most active thing we can do.

And we want to give you an opportunity to do that now. Each of you received a card on your way in today. If you didn't put up your hand and an usher will get you one.



Dear Lord, I commit these loved ones into your hands.
Please draw them to yourself and bring them home.

We'd like to encourage you to do a couple of things with that. First of all, prayerfully write the name of the prodigals in your life on the card – only use first names to protect the prodigal's privacy and dignity. For example you don't want to put "Ken and Lori" on one! Just use first names or initials. God knows.

You may even want to consider putting your own name on the card if you feel that you have wandered from God and need to come home.

Then we would like to encourage you to bring that card to the cross, and place it in the basket at the foot of the cross – stop for a moment and pray this brief prayer on the card - *Dear Lord, I commit these loved ones into your hands. Please draw them to yourself and bring them home.*

While we do that the band will lead us in a song of reflection.

If you desire some additional prayer for your specific situation, some members of the prayer team will be up at the front and they would be happy to have a brief word of prayer with you. And as usual they will be available for prayer after the service in the prayer room.

So as the band plays, I invite you to bring the names of your prodigals and place them at the foot of the cross.

SONG – Love Has Come For You

We are going to take this basket to the back of the auditorium, and as you leave, please take one of the cards and commit to praying for that person.

Closing

One day in church, years ago, this rather large woman got up and began to sing a solo. My friend turned to me and whispered – “it’s over”. I looked at him with puzzlement and he pointed in the direction of the fat lady singing. I immediately knew what he meant... and then tried to suppress my laughter through the rest of the service.

It’s not over till it’s over. There is always hope with God.

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

There are some beautiful verses in Isaiah 43:5-7 that express God’s heart.

"So don't be afraid: I'm with you. I'll round up all your scattered children, pull them in from east and west. I'll send orders north and south: 'Send them back. Return my sons from distant lands, my daughters from faraway places. I want them back, every last one who bears my name, every man, woman, and child whom I created for my glory, yes, personally formed and made each one.'" (Isaiah 43:5-7)

As you leave today, remember that God loves your prodigals more than you do... so don't forget to leave the light on!