

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 27, 2015

“Coming Home...”

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32,

In 1986 Henri Nouwen, a Dutch theologian and writer, toured St. Petersburg, Russia, the former Leningrad. While there he visited the famous Hermitage where he saw, among other things, Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son. The painting was in a hallway and received the natural light of a nearby window. Nouwen stood for two hours, mesmerized by this remarkable painting. As he stood there the sun changed, and at every change of the light's angle he saw a different aspect of the painting revealed. He would later write: "There were as many paintings in the Prodigal Son as there were changes in the day."

It is difficult for us to see something new in the parable of the Prodigal son. We have heard the story so many times we believe that we have squeezed it dry of meaning. Not only that, but as the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt. When we hear the opening words of the parable once again, "And there was a Father who had two sons," we mumble the words: "Heard it. Heard it. Heard it."

Yet, I would suggest that just as Henri Nouwen saw a half dozen different facets to Rembrandt's painting, so too are there many different angles to the story itself. This morning I would like for us to re-examine this familiar story by also looking at the other prodigal son.

The prodigal son himself is well known to us all. I want to retell the story of the lost boy in different words. It concerns a young fellow who persuaded his dad to give him an apparently large sum of money as an advance on his heritage. The dad was wise enough to know that when young people reach a certain age, the juices start to flow and they're ready to break free and go out into the world beyond home. Apparently, dad didn't argue or insist. He let the boy learn some lessons many people have to learn the hard way. Of course, it wasn't long before the boy had spent his money having a great time. He gambled, overspent, and generally fell in with a bad crowd, and before long his money was gone. Jobs were hard to find and the boy ended up on a farm feeding pigs. This prompted some real soul searching. Life at his dad's place, even for the employees, was a whole lot better than it was here. In retrospect, dad treated his people very well. So the boy decided to head home "with his tail between his legs," so to speak. Naturally, he couldn't expect to have his former position, but at least dad would probably give him a better job than he had now. Perhaps he could become one of the field hands and work his way up. Home the boy went. Remember the story? The young fellow started up the lane, only to have his dad see him from far off and run to meet his son. The old man waved off the carefully prepared apology. He immediately embraced the boy, then ordered an impromptu holiday, gave the kid a ring and shoes as symbols of sonship, and invited everyone to a homecoming party. What a remarkable and totally surprising reception for that boy. As the story concludes we have the makings of a grand homecoming party.

It was at this point that Jesus shifts the story and begins talking about the older brother. We mustn't forget the way the story began. It begins, "There was a man who had TWO sons." It is interesting that Jesus then launches into this wonderful redemptive story about the younger son who lost his way and came to himself. And, it seems to us as an after- thought for Jesus to suddenly shift the story to the older brother.

Let's take a look. As the elder brother is coming in from the fields after a hard day's work, he hears a big celebration taking place and he's puzzled. He stops a servant and asks him what all the music is about. The servant responds: "Oh, haven't you heard. It's your brother. He's not dead after all, he's alive and your father is having a grand homecoming party for him." I can see him as he turns his face toward home his face wrinkled with anger. The closer he gets the redder his face and his jaw begins to tighten. Dad meets him at the door and reads the look on his face. The elder brother says: "I don't like the way you run things around here. I've been here all this time and worked hard. I never wasted any of your money, yet you've never had a party for me and my friends. Yet this younger son of yours, one who wastes all of his money on prostitutes, when he comes home you throw a party. I don't like it. I don't like it at all. Oh, I know. My name is on the check book right underneath yours. But I just wish that I could feel some excitement every now and then, too." Then the dad pleads with him to come in, and there the story ends.

Now as much as I like the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin, and certainly there is no more beautiful story than that of the Prodigal Son, I feel that the heart of the story is in the elder brother. Here's the background. One day Jesus, as was often the case, was associating with publicans and sinners, the riff-raff of the streets.

And the religious people of the day were greatly troubled with the facts that Jesus spent so much time with all of these irresponsible people. The good Jew of that day wouldn't be caught dead in the home of some of the people whom Jesus made his friends.

So they threw a question to him. Why do you always associate with these sinners? Jesus responded by telling three stories—there was a lost coin, there was a lost sheep, there was a lost boy. Now, these good religious people could understand who Jesus was talking about in his stories. Obviously, he was talking about all of those sinful people he had been associating with. But then Jesus put the clincher on. He said that there is someone else in the story. And that someone else is an older brother. He never left the father's home and went to the far country. He stayed at home and did the right thing. Well, they knew who Jesus was talking about then. He was talking about them. They were the ones who had never left home and besmirched the family name. But the sad fact is this, like the elder brother, they didn't quite understand that they too were prodigal sons in need of redemptive love. And they didn't really understand that the Father loved them too.

Now the older brother has gone down in history as the villain of the story. He represents a mean picture to us. Or, "He got a lot of bad press." We are impressed by the fact that he had a certain bitterness of spirit, a certain self-righteousness about him. Or he must have had a poor relationship with his family. The fact of the matter is that Jesus didn't condemn him. And there is much good that can be said about him.

For example, I think that we can truthfully say that the elder brother was a hard worker. Even when the party was going on late in the evening he was just coming in from the fields. He wasn't one who said: "Well, it's 4:30, that's it for me." Oh no. He was a wealthy man and no doubt the sole heir now to the estate, but he was a man who loved his work, he was willing to put in overtime. Our churches are full of older brothers. Whenever there is a party going on you can be sure that they are busy working. You can count on them; they are there. And the truth of the matter is that most of the worthy causes could not be carried on if it were not for the elder brothers in society.

I'll tell you something else about this elder brother. I don't think he was really a mean person at heart like he has been portrayed. In fact, I don't doubt for a moment that he was a sincere Jew, one who attended the temple faithfully and kept all the laws. But the fact is even though he had lived home all these years he didn't really understand his father. He just didn't see why the father would want that worthless younger son of his back into the fold. He didn't understand that kind of love. At the height of his anger notice how he refers to his own brother. He turns to his father and says: "when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes..." Apparently the family had somehow received word about how this younger brother was living and the older brother wasn't going to let him or their father forget it. You almost wonder if there isn't a tinge of jealousy in the older brother. Maybe deep down inside he wanted to do those things and he is covering up his desires with pious morality. We don't know. To be sure the elder brother's heart has become very distressed and we might even say, at this moment, dark and hardened. He is unable to forgive in the heat of the moment.

But, perhaps, in the end a lot good can be said of the elder brother. He is earnest; he's sincere, he's a hard worker. And most persons in Protestant and Catholic circles today are exactly like him. That is, not too many of us have been saved from the skid rows of life. Not too many of us look back upon a shady past. The sad part is, although we are like the elder brother in that we have never wasted our life, we are also like him in three ways. Many of us don't see, first of all, how unforgiving we are. Second, we don't see this behavior as prodigal behavior for which we need forgiveness. And third, we don't seem to realize how much the Father loves us, too.

Our lives lack certain luster. We don't have the spirit of celebration about us that the Father has. We don't rejoice over redemption. But we must also cultivate in our hearts the knowledge that God loves us as much as he loves the younger brother. Let me say it again: God loves the older brother as much as he loves the younger brother and I think it's time that the older brother hears about it.

Most of us are like the elder son in that we think God must certainly measure sin. We think that in the end some people will owe more than others. But I want to tell you that it doesn't make any difference whether you owe God \$50 or \$500 you can't pay it. It doesn't make any difference whether you're an inch outside the Kingdom or a mile outside the Kingdom—you're outside the Kingdom until he forgives and brings you in. The elder brother needs a Savior just as much as the younger brother. The elder brother is just as much a prodigal in his behavior as the younger brother. If the elder brother had just realized that bitterness must be left outside the party and forgiveness must enter in....It would have made all the difference.

Friends, our churches today are full of people who have never left the Father's home, but for one reason or another they don't realize just how much the Father loves them too. And as a result they are living as though they don't even have a Father. They earnestly do what earnest people ought to do, but their souls aren't aglow. When the service is over we rarely talk about how real God is to us. We go into routine conversations about the weather and so on. Wouldn't it be great if we could have a homecoming party for a great host of people who have never gone to the city, so that they might fall in love with home. Amen.