

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

THE CALL TO BECOME

In a certain town, there was a sinner with a bad reputation. Everybody knew him, from the gas station attendant to the local parish priest. He had a slew of bad habits: drinking, smoking, fighting, and running around. If anything crooked or dirty happened in town, old Sam was usually involved. One Saturday morning after a three-day binge, he woke up with a horrible headache. He looked in a mirror, saw a black eye and didn't remember how it happened. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a traffic ticket he didn't remember. He scanned his dirty, ripped-up clothes, and had no recollection of what happened. Sam said to himself, "That's it; I've got to change my ways!"

So he pulled on his coat and stumbled down the street to the Catholic church. The confessional booth was open so he walked in and sat down. "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned," he said. "It's been twenty years since my last confession." The old priest immediately recognized his voice and said, "Sam, is that you?" "Yes, Father, it's me. And I hope you have some time on your hands. I've got a lot to confess." "Go ahead," said the priest, who thought to himself, "I've finally got him! I'm going to give old Sam a heavy penance. He's got it coming. Back at the rectory, the other priests are going to wish they took this shift."

Twenty minutes later, Sam is still reciting all his sins and describing each one in detail. "Wow!" thinks the priest. "I haven't heard a confession like this in all my years. I'm going to set a record for penance on this guy. Maybe I'll give him a hundred 'Hail Marys' and a thousand 'Our Fathers.'"

Fifteen minutes later, Sam is winding up his list of sins. The priest is just shaking his head. Sam pauses; the priest says, "Are you done, Sam?" Sam says, "Well, I've told you all I remember. Father, I probably deserve a lot of punishment and penance." The priest said, "Well, I've never heard such a detailed and lengthy confession like this."

"In that case," said Sam, "I have only one more thing to say before you pronounce judgment on me." "What's that?" said the priest. And Sam said, "Remember the Prodigal Son!" There was a long silence. Then the priest sighed and said, "Very well, my child. You are forgiven. Go in peace." With that, old Sam walked out the door. (Told by William G. Carter, *Lectionary Homiletics*, March 2001, p. 29)

We remember the prodigal son all right. It's hard to forget his self-centered, immature ways. Jesus' audience had to be appalled by the younger son's brash request to receive his share of the inheritance even before the father had died; the audience was even more surprised when the father agreed to such a request! It came as no surprise that the younger son quickly went through all of his money in a distant country. In his desperate neediness, the younger son signed on as a hired hand and his job was to feed slop to the farmer's pigs, which shows just how far this Jewish young man had fallen.

Verse 17 depicts the proverbial "light bulb" going on inside his head: "when he came to himself." That is to say he realized that he had messed up big time. So he decided to return home to his father. He would go back, not as a son but as an applicant. He hoped to get hired on to work in his father's fields where he would fare better than his current situation because the pigs were eating better than he was. He rehearsed his lines over and over again: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

Don't you love what happens next in the story? As the young man was still far off, his father saw him; the father was so filled with compassion that he ran to his son, put his arms around him, and smothered him with kisses. The boy tried to get out his well-rehearsed lines but the father interrupted him and ordered his slaves to bring out the best robe and put it on him, a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet – all signs that this boy was family, and nothing less would do. Then, to celebrate the younger son's homecoming, the father decided they needed to have a great big party to celebrate his son's safe return home – he had come back home to the family – no longer dead but alive, no longer lost but found.

We've heard this familiar story so many times before that we are no longer surprised by it. Perhaps it would help to hear a slightly different version of this well-known story. John Killinger puts a more contemporary spin on this parable. After wasting his money, being forced to work in places he never knew existed, and finally coming to his senses, the younger son takes the few dollars he has made washing dishes and buys a bus ticket. He rides all night, rehearsing his speech every couple of miles. "Dad, you were right, it's a tough world. I don't know what I was thinking... Dad, you were right..." At dawn the bus pulls up outside the bus stop in his little hometown and he tumbles off, wrinkled, unshaven, and a little worried about how he will be received at home. And then a voice calls, "Son!" And there is his father at the station – hugging him and holding him for all he is worth. The son sputters out the words, "But, Dad, how – how did you know I would be here, especially at this hour?" And the agent working at the bus station that morning said, "Are you kidding, boy? Your old man has come down here two, three times a day, every day since you've been gone."

Yes, we remember the prodigal son. In fact, at times, he reminds us of ourselves. We don't like to admit it but we see ourselves in him because we know what it's like to be self-centered and rebellious. We confess to our own brand of sinfulness and, when we come to our own senses, we too have experienced, time and time again, the Father's embrace and the love, grace, and forgiveness attached to our welcome home.

While we are at it, let's go ahead and admit that we also see ourselves in the older brother as well. Like him, many of us have never strayed from home or church. Consequently, we can be self-righteous and morally superior. Like the Pharisees and scribes, who murmured against Jesus and the company he kept and ate with – tax collectors and sinners – we keep score, we've determined who's in and out, who's worthy or not; and we can't enjoy the party because we are too busy feeling hurt or neglected or too angry that things don't always go our way. In a very real sense, both sons and we ourselves are lost, far from home, and in need of the Father's love.

The good news within this parable is that there is a wideness in God's mercy. Or, as someone has said so well: "God's grace gives us what we don't deserve; and, God's mercy prevents us from getting what we do deserve!" Whenever we come to our senses and truly repent of our sins, Jesus tells us that God comes running to embrace us and welcome us back home. God loves each and every one of us, not because we have earned it or deserve it, but because God wants to love us. God loves us before we enter the world, and even when we lose touch with the world around us. God loves us no matter how far we wander from God's heart. God will never stop loving us.

The story is told of a Chinese artist who undertook to paint the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In his first attempt, he showed the father standing, waiting at the gate for his son, who was seen approaching in the distance. When the artist showed his painting to a Christian friend, the friend exclaimed, "Oh, no, you don't have it right. The father shouldn't be standing, waiting. He should be running to meet his son." "But no Chinese father could do that!" said the artist.

“That is just the point,” replied his friend. “No human father would, but this is the astonishing story of a father that tells about God’s amazing mercy for us all – he loves us like that!” “I see,” replied the Chinese artist. In the next painting, the Chinese artist showed the father running to meet his son, and, in his hurry, he had put on shoes that didn’t match!

Whether or not both sons repent of their errant ways, there is no rejection from the father for he loves them both – even when they (or we) are most unlovable. Surely, the greatest “prodigal” in this story is the loving father. His giving is the most reckless and lavish of all; his love is extravagant; it’s more excessive than either the younger brother’s loose living or the older brother’s moral superiority. Without this father, there is no family. The father loves both boys in ways that do not abandon them to their own devices. We give thanks that God loves us and all people just like that.

In fact, we ought to pay attention to the third son in this scripture lesson – that’s right – the One, who is telling the story. Before long, our eyes will gaze up at the cross and there we will see God (in the person of Jesus) reaching with outstretched arms in order to gather all of us in and welcome us home. It was a very undignified way for God to act. Christ not only humbled himself, he was willing to be humiliated on the cross for our sakes and for our sins - in order to bring us back home to God.

So, we read and hear this parable and, if we are honest (with ourselves and God), we see ourselves in both wayward sons. We watch the third Son as he tells this story and then moves on toward Jerusalem and the cross with his name on it; and, we are moved to repentance, followed by profound gratitude for the forgiveness of our sins. And, Jesus helps us to see God in this father because God loves us like that but even more!

As I studied this parable, I saw something in it that I had not seen before. In this story, returning to the Father’s home is not the ultimate call of the parable. There is a call beyond the call to return. It is the call to become the Father, who welcomes home and calls for a celebration, who forgives, consoles, and heals (Henri Nouwen).

With gratitude in our hearts, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we, who are created in God’s own image, can become like the father in the story. We can move beyond simply identifying with both disobedient sons and their respective needs for repentance and forgiveness. Empowered by the Spirit, we can become more Christ-like, and thus, more like God the Father as we too learn to love with such excess, to show mercy, and be forgiving toward others. We rejoice that the radical love of God is always here for us as well – not just for us to receive but also to give – like Father, like Son, like disciples.

This is an open-ended parable, which draws us into the story and calls for us to write our own ending. As we follow Jesus and his example of obedience, may we hear and answer the call to become more and more like the father, to love others as God loves us, and to forgive others just as we have been forgiven. When we live in this way, we give glory to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
March 14, 2010