

## “The Prodigal Comes Home”

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

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**This masterpiece** is *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by the Dutch painter Rembrandt. It was one of the last works Rembrandt painted before he died in 1669. It is one of many artistic interpretations of this parable from Luke’s gospel. Indeed, Rembrandt himself painted and etched several versions of this story over the course of his career. This one is perceived by many to be his definitive interpretation.

The painting depicts, of course, the climactic moment in the parable, when the prodigal son returns home, into the loving embrace of his father. The elder brother stands on the right side of the painting, looking upon his younger brother with scorn and judgment. **Nearby are a couple household servants**, one older, one younger, both looking on in awe. **In the upper left of the painting**, standing in an arched doorway, is the young man’s mother, mostly in shadow, wearing a red pendant that matches the red cloaks worn by her husband and her elder son. **The focus is not on her**. The focus is on the three main characters in the parable: the wayward son, the loving father, the resentful brother.

The story begins with younger son: “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” In other words, *I’d like my inheritance, Dad, and I’d like it now*. The son does not say “please.” He does not ask. This is not a request. It is a demand. One gets the impression that this younger son is impetuous and impatient. The father consents. Why would he do that? Couldn’t he have just said, “No”? Or had this younger son been pecking away at his father for years? Maybe the father was tired of the fight. Maybe the father sensed somehow that his son was already lost to him.

So the father divides his estate and gives his younger son the share that belongs to him. The rest will go to the elder brother. The younger son travels to a faraway land, a distant country, somewhere completely removed from his home, his family, and whatever values his father and mother had tried to instill in him. There, he wastes all his wealth in wild extravagance. The Bible doesn’t tell us how much money he spent. But there’s no question it was a fair chunk of change. The word “prodigal” means “wasteful.” **One of Rembrandt’s earlier paintings** depicts this phase of the young man’s life. Some people call it *The Prodigal Son in the Tavern*. Others call it *The Prodigal Son in the Brothel*. He’s holding a flask of wine in one hand and a woman in the other. (She is sitting on his lap!) Curiously, the **face in this painting** is Rembrandt’s own. Perhaps he identified with this story. Perhaps many of us identify with this story. That time in our life when we wandered from the fold, indulged ourselves, spent way too much money, made a lot of foolish mistakes that we wish we could go back and undo.

**Maybe, in the moment, it feels good to indulge yourself.** But you pay the price for it later on, when you take stock of everything you've lost. In this young man's case, things went from great to bad to worse. Not only did he use up his entire inheritance, but a famine also struck the land. Now there's no food. No decent jobs. He wakes up in the mornings ... and he's *hungry*.

Desperate, **he hires himself out to a landowner**, who sends him out into the fields to feed the pigs. Of all creatures, *pigs!* Jesus was telling this story to a Jewish audience. Pigs were unclean animals. No one wanted anything to do with pigs! If the young man is Jewish, he's not only squandered his inheritance and turned his back on his family, he's also turned his back on his faith. Of course, he'd already done that, but now it's palpably obvious. (This pen drawing is also by Rembrandt.)

He earns a few coins from his work, but it's not enough. He asks other people for help. No one offers him anything. He's so hungry he even thinks about eating the husks the pigs are eating. He went from sitting in the lap of luxury to scraping the bottom of the barrel.

Something happens to him out there in those fields. He comes to his senses. Literally, the Greek says, "he came to himself." The person he had been all this time was not who he *really* was. So many people go out into the world to "find themselves." This young man found himself when he was dirt poor, ravenously hungry, and stinking like swine. He looks at what he's doing, who he's become, and he realizes: *This is not who God made me to be. Even my father's servants – the ones who fed me! – have better jobs, more money, and more food than I do.* It's a remarkable realization, an epiphany of enormous magnitude. **And he's right.** Rembrandt captures that; notice the fine clothing the servants wear. The son realizes how far he's fallen. Sometimes we find ourselves living a life that feels *perfectly fine* until there comes a painful moment when we realize: *I've royally screwed this up.*

**Sometimes people don't quite reach that point.** They get close. But they don't quite get to the *heart change* this young man experienced. He could have gone back home and said, "Can I have a little more?" Plenty of people do that, don't they – you give 'em a handout, they use it up, then they come back asking for more, and *nothing really ever changes.* Something different happened with this young man. *He changed.* "I will get up," he resolves, "and go to my father, and I will say to him, '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.'" He looks at his life, and he remembers his God in heaven, and he knows that he has betrayed both his *father's* trust – and his *Father's* trust. He becomes *repentant*.

Jesus tells this parable on the heels of two other parables, one about a lost sheep, another about a lost coin. "The will be more joy in heaven," Jesus says, "over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Here's an example of one sinner who repents.

**The young man makes his way home.** "While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." Rembrandt captures this moment. **The son, wearing tattered rags and worn-out sandals,** anguish on his face. **The father, reaching** out, tenderly, lovingly. **Notice his hands.** The father's left hand – the one on our right – is big, strong, muscular. The father's right hand – on our left – is smaller, gentler, more ... graceful.

Rembrandt gives us an illustration of who God is. God has two hands. There is the stern, strong judge. And there is the loving, tender, mercy ... grace. The Bible is full of stories about God's sternness, his judgment. And the Bible is full of stories about God's loving, tender, mercy and grace. God responds to our actions with one hand or the other, depending on the state of our heart. The young man in the parable returned to his father, broken, beaten, repentant. He needed the grace ... not the judgment.

**The father throws a party** for the son who was lost and now was found. "Bring out the best robe," he says, "and put it on him. Get the fatted calf, and kill it. We're going to celebrate!"

In context, Jesus is telling this parable to a bunch of scribes and Pharisees. They were grumbling because tax collectors and prostitutes had been coming to listen to Jesus. Those tax collectors and prostitutes had discerned that what they were doing was wrong. They were trying to figure out how to turn their lives around, how to get themselves out of the mess they were in. Their hearts were good. Jesus was showing them grace, just like the father in the story, showing his son grace, when he could have shown judgment. But the scribes and the Pharisees ... Jesus gives them the hand of judgment.

In the parable, **the elder son** is out in the field as all this is going on. He misses the moment of the reunion. When he approaches the house, he hears feasting and celebrating. He asks one of the servants what's going on. When he learns that his brother has come home, he's incensed. He's furious, enraged. And ... jealous. He confronts his father. "All these years I've been working like a slave for you! I've never disobeyed you! You've never even given me a *goat* so that I can have some have a little feast with my friends. But when this son of yours" – not "this brother of mine" – "when this *son of yours* came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

The elder son's problem is that he can only see what his younger brother did that was *wrong*. Not what his younger brother did that was *right*. He only sees the *sin*. He fails to notice the *repentance*.

The problem that the scribes and the Pharisees had was similar: they could only see the *wrong* that the tax collectors and the prostitutes had been doing. They couldn't see the repentance. They could only offer a hand of *judgment*. They needed to be able to offer a hand of *grace*.

**"Son," the father says, "you are always with me.** All that is mine is yours. But we *had* to celebrate. This *brother of yours* was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and has been found."

There are times when that firm hand of judgment is necessary. Times when someone truly needs to be told, "What you are doing is wrong," if they aren't able to see that truth for themselves. But there are also times when someone needs to be told, "I love you, and it doesn't matter what you did," because the person has already figured it out for themselves. They don't need to be judged again. They've already judged themselves. They've already taken the critical step of turning back to God.

**When that happens** – when someone has that epiphany, when they turn back to God, when God's loving hand touches their shoulder, holding them, comforting them, letting them cry – *the angels sing*. "There is joy in heaven," Jesus says. "Joy in the presence of God's angels."

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