

## The Father's Story

The prodigal son story is such a familiar story in the Christian tradition. It is one of the rare parables whose meaning seems relatively clear even to the one who is only casually acquainted with the faith. The spoiled son rebels against his father, basically saying, "I wish you were dead, and I will take my inheritance now." Predictably, someone with that level of maturity and degree of self-centeredness, goes off on his own with a lot of money and wastes it all. He finds himself penniless and friendless, and starts in on what for a Jew, would have been demeaning, soul-crushing work tending pigs. He is so hungry he wants to share the animals' food, and he starts in daydreaming, but at this point he is so beaten down that his greatest hope in the world is that he might become a servant in his father's house, because his father is a gracious man who treats those in his employ well. The son starts back home, and you can imagine him preparing the speech in his head, rehearsing it, praying that his father will at least hear him out, and maybe, from some deep reservoir of fatherly love take him back in so his doesn't starve. And in my favorite line of the passage, it says that while the son was still a long way off, the father sees him and runs to him. There is the beautiful, undignified image of the father not holding anything back while he goes after his son. That is the image we all hold in our heads, we all hope for in our hearts.

The story is not only familiar in the faith tradition, I think it is famous because it is familiar to our souls and resonates deeply with the human condition. These are the familiar stages of sin response in most of us. Great sins are always like a loss, mostly of relationship, and we react to them with something similar to the stages of grief. We start with denial, which is the hiding stage. We go off in our own far country, where no one knows us, or is likely to ask about what we have done. When confronted with the reality of our misdoings we become angrily defiant, often just furthering the problem. Then, as we feel the ramifications of our sin we begin to wonder if some bargain can be struck – maybe there is a way back; we know it will be different but possibly we can find some measure of acceptance if we repent and return. If you are one of us stubborn and intransigent sinners, you might then move on to the place of near despondency, where we worry that maybe there is no restoration possible, maybe we won't be forgiven, maybe this is our new lot.

But it is in the fifth step that is akin to acceptance where all the difference is made. Sometimes we let the despair get the upper hand, and we take the path of little faith, little courage; we accept the brokenness of the world we have created, and simply try to live with our choices. That is really more like getting stuck in the fourth stage. It is believing, self-centeredly, that our sin is great than God's love. But this story is told in our faith so that maybe we choose the other option of acceptance. That path calls on us to accept that maybe what we have been told about God is, in fact, true. That trajectory asks us to accept the seemingly inconceivable fact that God's love cannot be exhausted, that the bond was never truly severed, it's just that we stopped holding on for a little while when we turned our back. This path asks us to believe what is hard to hope for in the broken sinners soul – that if we turn back and want to come home, God

will run to us while we are yet a long way off. We tell the story so that when we despair in our sin, we might keep that hope alive.

I have a Rembrandt etching of this parable hanging in my office. It is not the famous painting that you see most often – with the regal looking father embracing his wayward son who has returned to his court. That one was done rather late in Rembrandt’s life and it is beautiful and somewhat refined. The one I have is a wood cutting that was done three decades earlier. In it the son looks unkempt and nearly wild, mangy and barely human, like someone who had been feeding with the animals and had scavenged as he travelled from a far off country. He is a person who knows in his very body the consequences of his choices. But in the picture, just as in the story, he is being grasped by the old father who cares about nothing but the fact that his son is back. In it, you think, just maybe, the son has found his way back home and understands all that that means. In the words of T. S. Eliot: "The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." The son has returned home and knows the Father’s love in a way that would make his former actions unthinkable, but it is only because of them that he has this moment, this understanding. The story beckons all sinners home again, into the arms of the God we never should have left.

I am reminded of the beautiful hymn, that I dearly love, titled, “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy.” The well-known first verse has us sing, “there’s a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea,” and ends by assuring us, “there is no place where earth’s failings have such kindly judgment given.” But there is another verse, sometimes left out of the hymnal, that I think we need to be reminded of when we feel like we are stuck in our sin in the far country with no way home. It says:

“But we make His love too narrow, By false limits of our own;  
And we magnify His strictness, With a zeal He will not own.  
Was there ever kinder shepherd, Half so gentle, half so sweet,  
As the Savior who would have us, Come and gather at His feet.

The hymn reminds us who is in charge of the story, and that part of our sin is in trying to make it our own. “we make his love too narrow, by false limits of our own, and we magnify his strictness, with a zeal he will not own.” We project our own smallness onto God in a way that simply will never fit. I recognize the actions of the son – the hiding and defiant stand to make it own his own, the playing out of scenarios in his head, the depressed thought that his father wouldn’t embrace him because he can’t manage to love himself. But what is clear from the story, but never actually said, is that the whole time the father is waiting, looking out, dreaming on his porch, longing for some sign of return, for some moment where he can throw down his dignity with reckless abandon and go running to his son. Without the story, it is a possibility that just wouldn’t occur to me because I narrow his love and magnify his strictness to make my own. But in the end, it is the father’s story to tell, and he tells the story of embracing love.

In Lent we prepare ourselves to be ready to hear the story of the father and believe it. We train our hearts to hope that if we repent and come home we will be embrace. We are reminded that when we were stuck in the far country, wallowing like pigs in our sin and brokenness, and didn’t even know to look for a way home, God came for us to bring us back. Let’s face it, as he hung on the cross, it was completely undignified, and yet totally becoming of the Lord.

Every time we wander, God sits on the porch, praying for signs of life, dreaming of our return, hoping for the moment to present itself where we appear on the horizon a long way off, wild and beaten down from our poor choices, when the father can run to embrace us with arms of love as wide as the sea. The story is not about you or your sin. It is about the father and his love. Desmond Tutu, writes this of the longing of the God who sits on the porch looks out on the horizon for his children: "I have a dream, God says. Please help me to realize it...that my children will know that they are members of one family...God's family. My Family." Strive to know it, dare to return to it, and fall into the embrace of God's love. Amen