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Luke 15:11-31

The Younger Son.

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If parables are to do what Jesus intends they will make us think!

This is the second talk on the parable we commonly call The Prodigal Son. The origin of the word prodigal is “to use resources recklessly”. We automatically think of the younger son who spent money recklessly but as Jon shared last week recklessness can also be applied to the Father who gave up his reputation to shower love on his son, who he thought was lost.

I’d like us to start our exploration thinking about what might have lead up to the younger son doing something as shocking as asking for his share of his father’s inheritance.

I imagine a restless young man, feeling trapped, seeing no future in working with his father and brother on the estate. (In other words a typical teenager!) He wanted adventure and freedom (or what he thought would be freedom). He knows by law he is entitled to a 3rd of the property. Like most young people he wants it now!

This young man was motivated by the desire for excitement and fun, the lure of status and popularity. Little thinking of the pain and shame he was loading on his father, who he was treating as if he was already dead.

As we know it took ruin to bring this young man to his senses. Feeding pigs! Hardly what he hoped for and the worst possible outcome for a Jew. How short lived his foray into stardom was! Was it worth it? Did he get the pleasure he hoped for? Sitting with the pigs he has plenty of time for reflection. He is starving, and now he is the one full of regret and shame.

His thoughts turn to home. In reality he is more trapped here than he ever was at home. He thinks of all he took for granted. “Oh I’m so sorry for how I’ve treated my father”. He remembers his fathers staff all have plenty of food. “If I go home, confess my wrongdoing, beg for mercy, maybe I can work there, be fed, and have somewhere safe to sleep”.

Aside: do we allow the tough times we experience to draw us back to God?

The young man starts trudging, homeward, step by step, heavy of heart.... Eventually home is in sight. Tears are streaming down his face. He hears a noise, rapid footsteps coming towards him. Maybe he’ll be sent away before he even has a chance to kneel before his father and beg forgiveness. He looks up, can it be true, his father is running towards him, arms open wide. Before he can say a word, filthy as he is, he is embraced by his father.

Let’s press pause here and think for a moment of experiences we have had of a really good hug. What did it feel like? Affectionate, close, warm, safe, being held firmly. You feel accepted, you feel wanted. It’s feels just great!

Not to mention the relief this young man would have felt in his father's arms. Especially when the father's next words were "Quick, bring the robe, the ring and the sandals" confirming he was accepted again. Then finally having the courage to lift his eyes to his father's face and seeing his beaming smile once more. The wonder of it, overwhelming emotion at the father's kindness!

This is how James Finley describes this encounter:

"The father embraces the son as preciousness almost too precious to bear. The son is at once undone and restored to wholeness in a flurry of embraces received and given. The two of them stand together out on the open road each laughing and crying at once. Each causes the other to lose his balance as he holds up the other. We can sense in their awkward dance of compassionate love, the dance we all long to dance. For we all intuit a taste of heaven in the compassionate embrace that welcomes home one who has been lost."

Wow, "a taste of heaven" is this part of what this parable is all about? Jesus is wanting to give us an image of heaven, and He uses the image of embrace! An image we can picture and understand. A picture of the reckless love of God. A picture of salvation.

As I get older and attend more funerals I find myself thinking about my own death. What might actually happen when I let go of my final breath? This image of the Father's embrace of His child really helps me. Letting go in the Father's love, being welcomed home, taken lovingly in the arms of my Heavenly Father.

Is this essentially what we all dream of and long for, to receive that welcome and embrace from God himself? In that safe, loving embrace wouldn't our doubts and fears just melt away? Everything would be restored, everything made right. All our struggles of trying to follow Jesus and feeling we so often get it wrong.

The good news is we can enter God's embrace now. Maybe not as fully as at the end of our earthly life. The Father's arms are open towards us. His reckless love is available. He offers us the love that sets us free. But can we step forward? What stops us? We come to Church, we say our confession but somehow we hesitate, why? our self reliance, our doubts and fears?

The Father is waiting, His arms are open wide. Is this image of embrace the heart of the Gospel? If we can but live from that place of trust, believing this truth, it would bring about real change now, as we live from within the Father's loving embrace not from a place of always trying to make ourselves worthy of it.