

## The Waiting Father Luke 15: 11-32

By  
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Jesus was a matchless teller of stories. Some of them have charmed and blessed the race for lo these 2,000 years. By common consent, the story of the prodigal son is "the pearl among the parables." Some have called it the greatest story ever told. Judging it as a work of imaginative art, Robert Bridges declared it "a perfectly flawless piece of work". Dickens called it, "the most touching story in literature". Dr. George Buttrick says, "When our clever sciences are forgotten, when all other stories pall, when the earth waxes old like a garment, this story will still be young; it will still have power to untangle our raveled life; it will still win us to our heart's true home". Small wonder that down the centuries it has inspired Rembrandt's pencil, the music of Debussy, a moving poem by John Masefield, choriographical treatment by Scott Wells' ballet.

Yet, its artistry should not make us forget that it originated in Jesus' "warfare" with the Pharisees. While it is polemical, it is armed with the gentleness of love. The story has such deep psychological insights that it has been called an "anatomy of repentance". Yet, in the mind of Jesus, the father stood for God, the elder brother for the Scribes and Pharisees, and the prodigal son for publicans and sinners. It is important to realize this is one of Jesus' two pointed parables. To begin with, he justifies his own mission in the face of his critics: "God is like the father of my story. This is his way with sinners, and therefore it is my way". Secondly, he rebukes the Scribes and Pharisees: "You represent the elder brother in my story, because your way of treating sinners is his (you are not happy when they return home—you want them to be cast out and forsaken because they are undeserving). But it is the wrong way, because it is not God's way." It is a rebuke, but a rebuke with love. We may well say that the contrast on which the whole parable hinges is that of the attitudes of the father and the elder brother to the prodigal. Since Helmolt Thielicke's great volume on the parables, no one can think of this parable in terms other than "The Waiting Father". God is the central character, and his gracious acceptance of his wayward and rebellious children the main theme. Some one has said that only once in all the Bible is God pictured as running, and that was when the father ran to welcome the prodigal home. "When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him,...and ran..." There can be no doubt that the parable centers round the father who waits and hurts till his boy comes home. That is God's attitude to the sinful and the lost. Sin not so much breaks the law of God as it breaks his great heart. We sin not only against his law but against his love. The prodigal son is a story about the grace of God. It says God loves the sinner before he repents, and when he does repent God forgives him and restores him to his great family. How fitting that we sang together today:

"Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound,  
that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
was blind, but now I see."

In this matchless story of the Master, I see three movements.

***Freedom and Estrangement.***

A young man is tired of home. He is bored and frustrated and out of step. His body is at home but his mind and heart are out there in the far country. He feels restricted and cramped. His father keeps telling him what he should do and what he should not do, and all the time he wants to do as he pleases. He calls it freedom. "I wanna be free." "It is my life and I want to live it as I please. The old man gets on my nerves. I want to see life, sow my wild oats before I settle down. Life is not here—life is out there." And so he goes to his father and says, "Give me (please take note of that) **Give me** the share of the inheritance that belongs to me. I am going away to find happiness." Home was such a drudge. The far country was so inviting.

Parents know all about that. Isn't it strange how so many things change and human nature remains so much the same. Our young people today feel they are so different, so original in their rebellion. Yet, the story of the ages is that of fathers broken hearted over their rebel children—Adam and Cain, Jacob and his rowdy sons who out of jealousy sold their brother Joseph into slavery, David and Absalom, Eli and his wayward boys, and this father and his prodigal. It's an old, old story.

There is a natural estrangement between the young and the old. We all experience that. This is a story of open rebellion and willful estrangement. There is no sorrow to be compared to that. To bring a child to life and see that child grow coarse and cheap and fling away the birthright like a fool, to dream the best for them and then see them choose the worse, to crave companionship with your children and get defiance, to long for affection from them and get ingratitude—that hurts. It wrenches the mind and breaks the heart.

That, too, is the hurt in the heart of God, that his children so often find their interests and lay their plans outside his love and will. To see his people find their pleasure and their joy outside his will must surely break the heart of God. To see them love the things of this world, succumb to its allurements, and live as though God does not exist must give him pain. It made the prophets downright angry to see the people God had chosen as his people give the devotion of their hearts to false and foreign gods. "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his owner, and the donkey its master's crib: but Israel does not know, my people do not " (Isaiah 1:23). That hurts! To be spurned, neglected, rejected by his own people brings sorrow to the heart of God. To love and have that love ignored brings a sorrow that only those who truly love will ever know. To ache for acceptance, affection, approval, and to receive only the cold shoulder, indifference, and unkindness inflicts a wound that only eternity can heal.

In a western town, lived a preacher whose son grew up tall and straight, with a mind keen and clean and wholesome. In that same town lived a foul-mouthed, atheistic, and very brilliant doctor. A strong friendship grew up between the two. The doctor, with his brilliant mind, became a hero to the boy, and gradually there came an estrangement in the preacher's home. Under the father's roof, the boy was irritable and unmanageable, contemptuous of his father's faith, resentful of even his mother's kindly concern. And wherever the interest of his father came into conflict with the interest of his friend, the boy consistently chose the latter's way and soon came almost completely under the spell of his atheistic hero, so much so that the people of the church shook their heads sadly and said, "He is getting more like the doctor than like his father. He is more the doctor's son than the son of his own father." One midnight, the preacher, with heavy heart, stole softly into the bedroom of his son, to find the air filled with the fumes of alcohol, and the boy's mother kneeling by his bed, stroking his hair, kissing his forehead,

caressing him. Looking up through the veil of tears, she said, "He won't let me love him when he's awake." That story is true many times over. The first movement in our story is a sad one—a young man seeking freedom is estranged from his father and breaks his heart. It says to us, "God loves you like that even when you are most contemptuous and rebellious and undeserving of his love." Freedom and estrangement.

***The second movement is one of Longing and Return.***

Napoleon once crossed a desert on one of his long marches; the hot sun beat down on the long line of soldiers, tired, hungry, burning with fierce thirst, when out there just ahead of them they saw a beautiful lake, green palm trees, sparkling waters—a lovely oasis in the middle of the desert. The men shouted, broke ranks, and ran for the water. But as they ran, the lake ran; the faster they went, the faster the lake receded, and then suddenly it wasn't there at all. It was a cheat, an illusion, a mirage.

A boy left home, journeyed to a far country, and learned all about illusions. "Give me the goods," he cried, "I want to see life." And off he went. In city after city, in sensation, after sensation he sought life and never found it. The more he sought it, the more it eluded him. The more he fed the hunger, the closer he came to famine. The more he did what he liked, the less he liked what he did. The path was disappointing. It didn't arrive. What looked like a thoroughfare turned out to be a blind alley. It didn't lead to liberty; it led to tyranny with the pigpen at the end of it.

Dr. Clovis Chappel, one of the South's most gifted and beloved preachers, told of the first Christmas tree entertainment he attended as a boy in Sunday School. It was in the village church, and everyone was there. The tree stood bright with candles and loaded down with presents. Santa Claus pranced genially among the people, distributing presents to those whose names were called. There was a feeble-minded man there, a hired hand on somebody's farm, looking at the tree with eager eyes. His name had not been called, and his face was growing downcast when suddenly Santa Claus took down the largest box on the tree, looked at it, and called his name. A look of radiance came into the poor face as he reached out his hands for the box. With nervous fingers he untied the string and opened it; and then anticipation gave way to pitiful despair. The box was empty. Somebody had played a trick on the village idiot. It is a terrible story, but not so terrible as the stories that come up out of life. The world is full of empty boxes, and we've all taken turns playing the idiot.

Something like that is happening in wide areas of our world today. We call it secularism. Georgia Harkness called it, "the modern rival of Christianity"—the new religion of man. Secularism is the ordering and conducting of life as if God did not exist, life apart from the Father—a colossal modern mirage.

Will Durant wrote a sad and cynical book called *The Meaning of Life* in which he wanted to know why the optimism of the nineteenth century had given way to the pessimism of the twentieth century—why all the bright promises of reason and the fruits of science had been exploited for nothing but futility and destruction. "We move," he said, "into an age of spiritual exhaustion like that which hungered for the birth of Christ. The great question of our time is not collectivism versus individualism, not Europe versus America, not even East versus West; it is **whether people can bear to live without God.**" The prodigal son is our story all over again—a boy who in his heart had broken with his father, set out under sunny skies to center life in his

own will, to persuade himself that he could be his own law, and in a far country manage life apart from the influence of his father. Life without God—always a mirage.

Away in the far country, down in the pigpen eating the husks of the pods the pigs were fed, this young man "came to himself". A miracle was taking place in his own heart. What he once despised he was now beginning to love. What he had sought by leaving he knew he must now find by returning. What he had so vainly sought in the far country was right there in the spot from which he had run away. Once he had been at home while his heart was in the far country, now he was in the far country, but his heart was at home. "The prodigal is wistful not for what he has wasted, but for what his father has kept" (Raphael H. Miller, *Who Lives In You*, 40). "I will arise and go...and I will say to my father, "Father, make me..." At first he said, "Father give me", now begs, "Father, make me." Longing and return.

***That leads to the third movement in our story—Anguish and Reconciliation.***

It is not easy to come back. Any beaten athlete, from blind Samson to Joe Frasier knows that. Can we come back from defeat? Are the lost ever found? Can human nature be changed? Do the prodigals come home?

Here is the grand truth: The most hopeful news the world has ever received: "But while he was yet far off, his father saw him..." Here is the great heart of the Gospel. God has not made us puppets. He has made us persons—free to choose the evil and free to choose the good. He will not thrust himself upon us. He will not impose his will upon us. That same father who respected the son's rights when he went away, who refused to coerce or restrain him, never lost his son out of his heart. He followed the boy in all his shabby defilement; he stood like a haunting shadow behind the boy as he lost out in the game of life; and when he came to himself and turned his feet at last back to the father's house, the father was waiting with forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation. "While he was yet a great way off, the father saw him,...and ran..."

The late G. W. Rosenbery told a story out of his early ministry. He was in a railway coach speeding across the state to attend a conference. Few people rode on trains in those days, and one boy in his late teens, apparently very nervous, attracted the attention of his fellow passengers. The boy was fidgety and restless. He would sit in one seat for a few moments, then move down the car to another.

The minister began to watch him and study him; finally he sat down beside the boy and said, "What's troubling you, son? Worried about something? Maybe I can help you. I am a minister, and if you feel like telling me, I should like nothing better than to help you if I can." "Sure, sure," the boy said, "I don't mind telling you. Are you acquainted with a little town named Springvale?" "Well, not exactly. I know of it. It is the next stop, isn't it?" "Yes," said the boy. "We'll be there in fifteen minutes. That's my home. I used to live there. My father and mother live there still, just a mile on this side of the town. Three years ago I had a quarrel with my father. I said, "You'll never see me again." I ran away from home. Three years, and they've been tough years. Sometimes I wrote to my mother. I wrote her last week and told her I would be on this train passing through. I told her I would like to come home just once; asked her if it was all right for me to stop, to hang something white outside the house so that I would know that father had agreed to let me stop. I told her not to do it unless father wanted it. She would do it regardless, you know, but I had to know how Dad feels."

The boy looked out the window, then started up excitedly. "Look, sir, my house is just around the bend, beyond the hill. Will you please look for me, see if there is something white? I can't stand to look. If there isn't anything white—you look, please!" The train lurched a bit as it made the slow curve, and the minister kept his eyes on the brow of the hill. Then forgetting his dignity, he fairly shouted, "Look, son, look!" There stood a little farmhouse under the trees, but you could hardly see the house for white. It seems that the father and mother had taken every bed sheet, bedspread, tablecloth, pillowcase, and even handkerchiefs, and hung them out on the clothes line and the trees. The boy's face went white, his lips quivered. He couldn't talk. His nervous fingers clutched the cheap suitcase, and he was out of the car before it had wholly stopped at the water tank. The minister said that the last he saw of him, he was running as fast as his legs could carry him, up the hill to the little house where the white sheets fluttered in the wind.

There are many elaborate theories about the meaning of the cross, and profound words are needed to express it. But we are grateful, too, for a simple story which vividly tells us that the white sheets are out on the eternal hills of God. The prodigal can come home.

Some of you want to come home. You have been a long time away. You need to come to yourself and say "I will arise and go to my Father." Your father has been waiting for you. He will receive you.

Some of you have been finding your joy and pleasure somewhere other than God. You go through the motions, but your heart is not in it. You come to church, but your heart is somewhere else. You break God's law, but you also break his heart.

Some of you have been trying to live without God. You have believed the illusion that all you need is yourself and this world of gadgets and things. Your house is full of gadgets, but your heart is cold and empty. You know something is missing—that something is someone—God.

The good news is that God knows about you and still cares. He is waiting for you. When you come to yourself and turn toward home, you will find him running to meet you.