

The Spirituality of Imperfection
Sunday March 17, 2019

My reflection in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) begins with a story about two young boys. One was eleven and one was six. They were creating a lot of mischief one summer. If they weren't personally involved they were helping to plot all kinds of problems for adults.

Things got so bad that their mother didn't even want to go into town because she feared she was going to hear about another incident that the boys had caused. A friend told her that there was a new youth minister in town and he worked with children of all ages. "Send him over," the mother said, "I will try anything."

The minister came by and sat at the kitchen table with the boy's mother. "Bring by the youngest boy so we can talk." The boy came and was quiet. The minister knew this game so he just sat and stared. Eventually the minister said "where is God?" A short pause and with a slightly louder voice: "where is God." No answer from the young boy. Finally in his fire and brimstone voice "**WHERE IS GOD?**" The boy got up and ran up the stairs to his room.

The older brother came in and said "what's going on? What did the minister want?" The younger brother answered "I can't tell you. It is too much to even talk about." The older brother would have none of that and said "I'm in this with you. Whatever you did I did too. Tell me what is going on." The young brother quietly said "God is missing and they think we did it."

I love that story. I love how the mother would do anything to set the boys on the "right track" even to invite the youth minister to her kitchen table. I had a friend describe his relationship with his two boys as: "he loved them more than oxygen. They were his life."

In today's parable there is a lot of speculation on the whole story. For example if the father loved his son (more than oxygen) "what was the father thinking" by giving the younger son his inheritance and sending him on his way? "What propelled the younger son out of the house?" Another question is "what brought the prodigal son to his senses?" Finally "why would Jesus tell such a story?"

My personal feeling, is Jesus is reminding us what he has been saying all along in his teachings that the "kingdom is not some far off place but we are living it right now right here." Even those cringe moments when everything important to you seems to be falling apart. Or **especially** those moments when your life isn't going the

way you expected. The moments of interaction in your family when you are left shaking your head wondering “what just happened?”

Let’s unpack this parable as a **domestic moment** in a typical family of upper income during Jesus’ time. Yes, something must have happened or built up to the point that the son wanted to leave the family. Did he lose his sense of belonging? Did he feel dissatisfied with his identity in the family? Was he challenging his purpose in life or simply looking for the next party as he searched for meaning. Of course we will never know because part of the beauty of the parables is their brevity. We need to fill in the blanks in the story and by doing so we can identify with different characters.

I am going to step back just for a minute while I give some context to this parable in the Bible. This parable is in a group of three “lost” parables. The other two include one about a sheep that has gone missing and is found to great rejoicing. The other is about a woman who has lost a coin who turns her house upside down looking for it and when she finds it throws a big party. I think if Jesus was speaking today he would talk about car keys going missing or an Iphone that can’t be found. He, Jesus, is showing to us, even in these moments, when we have lost very important objects that this is the turmoil where we need comforting.

The third parable in this group is about the lost son-not a sheep or an object but a real family member. He, the lost son, comes to his senses and starts for home. Have you ever wondered about the book of life? The book of life answers that other people may have read that you never got to read. We are hearing, in this parable, about one of those life moments where the prodigal son comes to his senses and the father gets a second chance. We get a sense of the anguish the father was going through when it is noted that he **ran** to his son. This is a man old enough to have two grown sons and he is so overjoyed at the return that he **runs** to see his wayward son. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

The beautiful image of a father being reunited with his son is enhanced with the best robes and ring being brought out to show the son is back. Let’s not forget the “fatted calf” for the barbeque! The extravagant welcome itself raises questions whether the father had second thoughts about sending his son off, in the first place, with a lot of money to a distant land. However, there is no talk of that now. He is back and let us celebrate the return.

End of story, not quite. Oops, did the father forget about the older brother by not inviting him to the party. The father indulges the one who slights him and slights

the one who indulges him. By the time the older brother comes back from working in the fields he has a definite opinion about giving this squandering, wayward and lazy “son of yours” a welcome home party. He is so upset he doesn’t even call him his brother—he is distancing himself from this family.

If something built up in the younger son’s life to get him to leave the family the same is true of the older brother. I mean it sounds like dad never took him out to golf at Widows Walk or to a guy’s night out at Barker Tavern. The older brother doesn’t feel like a family member but identifies with being a **slave** for his father. He never disobeyed him and never even got a young goat to celebrate with his friends with: “but when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fatted calf for him!”

The father, seemingly realizing for the first time that he actually had two lost sons, confirms his blessing to the older brother: “My son, the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

I am tempted to ask “who do you identify with in the story”? I would answer that I identify with whoever was making mistakes. I have been the son who left home under less than amicable circumstances. I was the jealous brother playing by “the rules” and I have been the less than perfect father missing the son “who went away.” I see in Jesus’ parable of the lost son’s a story of comfort in our imperfection. Everyone was making relationship mistakes in this family but the imperfect father makes an attempt at reconciliation and his actions were sincere. He embodies an example of behavior toward others which is grace oozing with compassion and love.

A theme throughout the New Testament is expressed by the father: the compassion of comfort by imperfect people. The father’s challenge is different than the previous parables about lost sheep and a lost coin. Lost children can talk back and express feelings and emotions. The father comforts his sons in pain. He is the one attempting to reunite the family.

Was there imperfection in giving an extravagant welcome to an imperfect son? Jesus doesn’t think so and Elizabeth Tarbox reflecting on this moment says: “I give thanks for the opportunities to love that present themselves in the turmoil of life... For in giving ourselves to comfort others we receive life blessings and in taking care of another, we are cared for.” Jesus is presenting to us an example, through this parable, how even in our imperfection we can comfort others with grace, compassion and love.

– William Ketchum