

And He Came to Himself

There is, perhaps, no parable in the New Testament more beloved, more discussed, more interpreted, more preached on, more alluded to, more simply popular than the story of the Prodigal Son. There's the father and whom he represents. There is the justifiable ire of the elder brother who has been running the family business and chauffeuring dad and mom to the chiropractor and pharmacy while his kid brother has been hanging out at Hooters and guzzling down the Coors. It is not just this family; it is all families. On some deep level, we know this story. There is so much in it that speaks to the archetypes and true stories that live within us. We are this story. And so we can read it over and over again. And we can learn. For, in the final analysis, it is a story about the all-embracing, amazing grace-filled love of Almighty God.

Today, however, we want to focus on the young son. We want to reflect on that crucial, transforming moment when he “came to his senses.” Think about it. If we come to our senses it means we could not see, and then we could see. We could not hear, and then we could hear. We could not smell and taste anything real, and then we could savor. We could not touch, and then we could feel it all. To come to your senses is to realize, to discover, to reconnect with something that was there all along. It is going from blindness to sight, from not knowing to knowing, from being in the dark to being in the light. When you come to your senses you open yourself up to the awesome possibility of truth—the truth about who you really are and where you really belong and to whom you really belong. But I am jumping ahead in the story.

. Let's examine just those verses which tell the rebel son's story. "The younger one said to his father: 'Father, give me the share of the property coming to me.' So he divided the property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and left the country for a distant region. In that place, because he lived without control, he went through all of his possessions. When he had spent everything, a powerful famine fell over that land. He himself began to grow hungry. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region who sent him to the fields to tend the pigs. He longed to be filled from the husks the pigs were eating! But no one gave him any. He came to his senses and said, 'All my father's workers have more than enough food, yet here am I perishing in a famine. I will get up, go to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you! I am no longer worthy to be called your son! Treat me as one of your workers!' So he went towards his father....'" (Luke 15: 12-20a)

Our reflection will show that no matter how many times we approach this parable there are new and soul-stirring things to be learned because we view it through the ever-changing lens of this moment in our personal lives, in our communal lives and in our artistic lives. I will read a verse and then comment on it.

One. Luke: **Give me the share of the property coming to me.**

Two: "All I want is my fair share; all I want is what is coming to me." Those are Sally's famous words in the *Peanuts* Christmas special. Those are the words of the over-privileged and under-grateful. Those are the words of millions, and, if we were honest, those are often our words. Those are the

words of the one who will come to be known as the Prodigal, the lost one. He is saying: “I know you have stashed away some big bucks in a trust fund for me. I want it now. I demand it now. Fork it over, dad. I’m outta here.” Read carefully. No argument from dad here.

Many Days later he gathered up everything.

Two: The lap top. The Bose sound system. A closet full of Abercrombie and Fitch jeans and jackets. The X Box du jour. A couple thousand dollars worth of video games. Hair gels, body lotions, electric tooth brushes. Skis. Tennis rackets, lacrosse sticks and basketballs. Some of it thrown into Gucci luggage. Some of it thrown into trash bags. All of it tossed into the Range Rover. And cash. Lots of it. This is what he believes is everything. This is what he believes defines him. This is his fair share.

And left the country for a distant region

Two: Headed for the West Coast. 3000 miles away. But that was the geography, and his trip was about so much more than geography. He left home. Actually and metaphorically. He left his senses, and he left himself. He went to another place in every way that you can go to another place. He left his father, who loved him, in every way that you can leave your father. And his father gave him the resources to do it. Without a word he let him go. Because he was wise he knew that that was how it had to be, that the only way to authentic relationship was through choice. He had the power to force him to stay; he had the wisdom to let him go.

In that place, because he lived without control

Flash forward. News report. Percent of college students in the USA who binge drink, 49%. Percent who use cocaine and smoke pot. Percent who just don't care. Flash back. Because. Because. Because. Because he lived without control. He isn't the victim of random forces. Things just don't happen to him. It is because he is, as we would say, out of control. He drinks what he wants. He spends what he wants. He sleeps when he wants and with whom he wants. Maybe he doesn't actually do anything illegal. Maybe he does. He is just careless and stupid and wild. It isn't just that he doesn't know what he is doing; he doesn't know who he is.

He went through all his possessions

Spends it. Trashes it. Blows through it. Gambles it away on March madness. Uses it as collateral. Pawns it. Maxes out his Master Card. Fragments of his material self litter the interstates and turn up at high end garage sales. He was busted, broke, poverty stricken. Get it?

He is out in the orange groves with the migrant workers thinking to himself: "Damn. I never realized how hard and long these people worked." But then the crazy weather patterns kill all the oranges and everything else that grows is God's great California earth, and there is nothing left to pick. Anywhere. No lettuce. No dates. No avocados. Nothing. The lines around the clinics and the food pantries stretch for miles. The state goes broke; the pleas for federal funding are ignored. The people he thinks are his friends leave with the flat screened TV. It is like some drug-induced vision, except it was real.

He himself began to grow hungry.

He understands for the first time in his satiated and satisfied life the meaning of the words hunger and starvation. His stomach growls and then grows silent. His dizzy and weak. He thinks of all those fund raisers for the Samaritan Soup Kitchen, the ones he ignored. He dreams of Burger King and Starbucks, of Papa Johns and Baskin Robbins. But they are no more.

So he hired himself out to the local pig farmers. He longed to be filled from the husks the pigs were eating! But no one gave him any.

Garbage dumps. Diamond mines. Rock piles. The guy that follows the elephants around as the circus parades when he was a kid. “Slave labor,” he groans. That’s how he feels; that’s how desperate he is. But for you, it may not actually be that place. It may just feel like that place. Where were you when the deep hunger hit? Was it in a college dorm or a corporate cubicle or a suburban shopping center or your own kitchen? When was it? Was it the morning after a night when you broke your promise never to drink again or never to cheat on your husband? Or was it just a day when you said: I have had enough? This is not who I am. When did emptiness engulf you? When did you long to be filled?

And he came to his senses and said, ‘All my father’s workers have more than enough food, yet here am I perishing in a famine

Whenever and wherever, it is the place where we have our moment of truth, where we are either going to just stay in the muck or know that we are

created for something more, something better. For wherever it is it is the place—the physical and mental and emotional and spiritual place—where we hit what they call rock bottom. It is the place where we come to our senses. It is the place where we come to ourselves. The question is: to what self do we come? Richard Rohr wrote: “The True Self does not teach us compassion as much as it is compassion already. And from this more spacious and grounded place, one naturally connects, empathizes, forgives and loves just about everything. We were made in love, for love, and unto love....This deep inner ‘yes’ is God in me, is already loving God through me. the false self does not really know how to love, in a very deep or broad way. It is too opportunistic. It is too small. It is too self-referential to be compassionate.

The True Self—where you and God are one—does not choose to love as much as it is love itself already. Loving from this vast space is experienced as a river within you that flows of its own accord.”

I will get up, go to my father and say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you! I am no longer worthy to be called your son! Treat me as one of your workers!’ So he went towards his father.

I will get up. I will rise up. I will stand up. I will move. I will not stay where I am. I left. I got myself into this mess. I am the one who has to go. And when I get there I will tell him how very, very sorry I am. *****

As it was with him it was with so many others. For each of us has this moment when we are surrounded, in some way, by metaphorical and spiritual and emotional and actual garbage. Each of us has a moment when

we are starving, longing, yearning for that which will take the hunger away. And in that moment, each of us, even if we have not behaved quite so badly, face that moment when we come to our senses.

Hear the words of Dr. King as he sat in Selma and agonized over the cost of personal sacrifice, as he suffered deeply over threats to those he loved; hear his words as he comes to himself

“I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it ... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak." And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And Lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world." I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.”

Hear the poet May Sarton as she comes to herself:

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places,
I have been dissolved and shaken
Worn other people's faces.
Run madly, as if Time were there
Terribly old, crying a warning
'Hurry, you will be dead before—"
(What? Before you reach the morning?
Or the end of the poem is clear?
Or love safe in the walled city?)
Now to stand still, to be here,

Feel my own weight and density!
...So all the poem is, can give,
grows in me to become the song.
Made so and rooted so by love
Now there is time and Time is young
O, in this single hour I live
All of myself and do not move
I, the pursued, who madly ran
Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun

There are millions of moments. Some time as we walk with Jesus, some time for each of us, is a call to come to our senses, to come to ourselves, to return to the God who has blessed us. For in the cycle of faith it is the time when we ask: what have I left which is true? What am I running from? What hole am I trying to fill. During Lent, as we move closer to the cross, we hear those words: Come to your true self. Return to the one who gave you everything. We spend a lot of time and energy avoiding this moment. We fight it. We struggle against it. We drink. We use drugs. We immerse ourselves in popular culture. We make excuses. We stay phony busy. We do everything we can to avoid coming to the truth of ourselves because it is the thing we fear the most. We take all that God has given us, our inheritance, and we squander it. We waste it. We spend it. And then we, ourselves, are spent. That is when we can separate that which is false from that which is true, that which is idol from that which is Divinity, that which is inevitable dust to that which is forever. Just think about the sorry messes so many of us make of our lives. And think about why some get up and go, and others do not. Why do some have the moment and others never get it?

There is a moment when we either do—or do not—come to our senses. Realize. Become aware. Wake up. Turn around. Get up. That is the moment when we embrace the truth of who we are, of what we have done wrong, of how we have gotten our priorities out of whack, of how we have worshipped all the wrong things or looked for love in all the wrong places. That is the moment when we know that we can get up, that we can go home, that our Father loves us even though we have struggled to run from his love.

And the glory of this story, of his and of ours, is that what awaits us is one who says: “My child is home. Party time.”

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith, The Gathering of Baltimore, (Zoom Edition), February 21st, 2021