

Into the far country. A sermon preached on June 17, 2018 (Father's Day) at St. Giles Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC, by Rev. Herb Hilder

Lessons; PSALM 34:1-10

II CORINTHIANS 5:17-21

LUKE 15:1-2, 11-32

The original of the painting reprinted on your bulletin cover and up on the screen is a large painting – 6x8 feet – so life-size

It is one of the art treasures that hang in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia

People who have seen the painting *in situ* say that no reproduction does it full justice.

But for our purposes this morning, it will have to do!

The painting was completed in 1668-9 by Dutch master, Rembrandt.

Art historians believe it may well have been Rembrandt's last large scale painting,

Though owing to many earlier sketches, it was a theme that long preoccupied Rembrandt.

Rembrandt's paintings are particularly known for their use of light and shadow.

This painting clearly shows his skill at setting a mood and drawing us in.

Here you have the light enveloped embrace of an old man and a young (it is a father and his son)

Surrounded by 4 mysterious bystanders – the 4th is a very shadowy outline of a woman standing just to the left side of the old man's head

Rembrandt titled the painting, The Return of the Prodigal Son.

AWW – we say, we know that story

I wonder...do we?

Yes, of course we know it...it's about a nasty and selfish younger brother who demands in essence that his dad, drop dead, so he can get his share of Dad's money.

When he has the money, he goes off and lives it up. Spending his inheritance on riotous living.

When the money runs out – and for such people who have no marketable skills excepting spending money – the money always runs out,

He returns home where his father welcomes him with open arms.

There is a “clear the shelves of Party City feast”

To celebrate this homecoming

But his older brother will have nothing to do with this feast – in fact, older brother is very bitter about the whole thing.

That is a rough outline of the story I remember from my Sunday school flannel board days..

How about you? What do you remember? What stands out for you about the story?...

And I have heard it a lot – every SS curriculum of St. Andrew’s Welland had a lesson on the prodigal – though it tended to play up the return of the younger brother and downplay the older brother’s reaction.

So, familiar story...yes....

When I got to Knox College, I remember going out to supply preach at a little rural congregation well outside the city limits.

As I arrived, I was quizzed by the Clerk of Session – was I going to preach on the Prodigal Son. Hidden agenda? Trick question?

No, I am preaching from the Sermon on the Mount – salt of the earth and light of the world.

Good – he continued – and much relieved as he said it.

The last 4 students from the College have preached on the Prodigal Son – we be wondering if that was the only story they knew.

Frankly boy, we need to hear another story!!!

As a result of that incident, I have favoured the other two lost parables of Luke 15 – particularly the woman who looks for the lost coin.

Though I always enjoy singing the Ira David Sankey revivalist chestnut about the first parable of Luke 15 – there were 90 and 9 who safely lay in the shelter of the fold,

This morning, I want to lead us through the parable of the Prodigal son in a more reflective way than usual..posing more 'I wonder' questions, and pausing to get each of us to think about aspects of the parable.

Using the visual aid of Rembrandt's painting, coupled with the lesson from Luke Walter read moments ago.

For remember, parables are pictures of the world as it is, not as God wishes it to be. Parables are there to cause us to confront in our own lives why we so often need the cleansing of the unmerited love of God.

Remember also,
 These three parables – lost sheep, lost coin, lost son – are prompted by the Pharisees and scribes criticism that all the tax collectors and sinners are sitting listening to Jesus
AND Jesus is WELOMING THEM AND EATING WITH THEM!!

We begin then at the left of the picture and half way through the Lucan parable
 The younger brother has returned home.
 Do you see how Rembrandt has clothed him?
 Look at his head....his feet...the condition of the sandals....
 Look at his clothes.....the clothes of the son of a wealthy man.

I wonder if he smells bad

Look at the posture he assumes before his father.

This is the same son who not so long ago demanded of this father – Give me my inheritance now DAD.

Property inheritance usually took place upon death – so essentially this son is saying – DROP DEAD, OLD MAN

I want that to which I am entitled now!

I wonder, do any of us, do I, act in ways that feed an entitlement mindset and attitude – irrespective of how this might hurt those to which we are the closest? ...

Is there, has there been a time when I take everything I have been given for granted....

How did I lose this sense of gratitude and thankfulness?

PAUSE

Jesus tells us this younger son
**travelled to a distant country and there he
 squandered his property in dissolute living (vs.
 13)**

Question: Have you ever squandered, used up carelessly something precious,
 Something given to you?....

Have you ever traded something valuable for an empty promise or something cheap?

What was it?...

What led you to squander something precious?...
 Did you have regrets or a sense of remorse?
 Did you ask yourself...how could I do such a
 thing?...

PAUSE

Have you ever lived what could be termed a
 dissolute life?

Are you still living it – but are good at keep up
 appearances to the contrary?

Are you one of those who others describe as having
 it all together, but you know your foci is on things
 that demean, belittle and cheapen you?...

PAUSE

When the money and the good times only friends
 are gone, the young man now has few options.

So he hires himself out as a feeder of pigs.

Within Jewish religious observance and dietary
 laws – pigs are a no no.

For they are seen to be unclean

In time (not specified) the young man **comes
 to himself** and decides to return home – convinced
 that no matter what his father will take him on as
 hired help.

Question: is this return home and coming to oneself
 prompted by sincere contrition or is he what has
 pejoratively been often termed a 'soup kitchen
 conversion' – conversion only to receive food!

Question: what prompts each of you to
 intentionally turn from actions thoughts and

behaviours that drive you away from God, others and yourself?

Simple hunger in more worldly desires or a realization more sublime...

PAUSE

We will come back to the father in the painting and the parable in a moment

Right now,

Shift your focus from the younger brother kneeling before Dad

To the older brother at the right hand side of the picture.

Look at his hands.

Look at his posture...welcoming or standoffish.

Look at his face...smiling or disdainful

What do you see? What do you think? Happy to see his little brother?...

The parable says that not only is the older brother planning to absent himself from the great feast, But he is livid with his father, for making such a fuss and spending his (older brother's inheritance) in such a way.

For this wastrel he looks down upon has not only brought embarrassment and loss of status to the family but also a serious decline in the family's wealth.

Older brother has attitude does he not?

For him,

It's not fair!

Older brother – Look I have been faithful, I have worked like a slave for you
 I have NEVER disobeyed your commands
 HE has used his inheritance from you to buy prostitutes!!
 He gets a fatted calf – I’ve never even got so much as a goat.
 Some peeved is older brother!

PAUSE

Have you ever felt “some peeved” over life’s unfairness?
 Those times and occasions when rotters, wastrels, egits and jerks get breaks that you never got
 And they YOU SAY they should not get!
 Think of such a time of unfairness in your life
 I wonder – did you lash out at God? Another?
 Did you stomp your feet, shout no, not fair!

We understand older brother’s reaction!
 We may even say, I know what he’s feeling; why he says what he does.

PAUSE

Consider for a moment what especially upsets older brother.
 It’s the cost of the party time party!
 I wonder, why he is so furious about this
 Does money factor in our cries of unfairness? I wonder why....

PAUSE

Older brother has rigorously kept all the rules and regulations – never deviating a degree from any of them.

I wonder are some of us like older brother in this – keeping all the rules and regulations and NEVER deviating from them.

What happens when life does not go as we want?
We are sorrowful?

But deeply angry and bitter?

One has worked hard to be a decent person and kept all the rules, and then you witness something akin to younger brother's welcome home.

After all younger brother has done
How would you feel?

Would you be furious with yourself?

Would you wonder why you bothered to keep all the rules?

PAUSE

Older brother types in this life believe if they live a good life

They should get a good life

That God owes them a smooth road if they try very hard to live up to God's standards

That sense of entitlement again!!!!

Question: what happens then if you are an elder brother type and things go wrong in your life?

Question: Think of a time, a place, person or persons where things went sideways,

Where to phrase “it’s not fair” dominated your waking and disrupted your sleeping life

A refrain that led you to hold long grudges and hold them bitterly.

A refrain that made you look down on people of other races, religious and life styles.

A refrain that resulted in your feeling more insecure and overly sensitive to criticism and rejection on the one hand

And fierce and merciless in your condemnation of others....

Question: Are you still in such a place,

A mindset over those unfair times of your life – recent or long ago?

What is feeding that negative and destructive mindset?

For “spite” is not among the fruits of the Spirit!

One of the warning signals of older brother mindset taking the dominant position is a prayer life that is short on wonder, awe, intimacy and delight in God.

If your prayer life has degenerated into grumbling, griping and complaining about your situation in comparison to others before God, Beware of creeping older brotherism of Luke 15.

For that was the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees and scribes to whom Jesus was speaking/ Contrary to their own belief on how to follow God,

They were in actuality arrogantly self-righteous about God and everyone else.

PAUSE

Shift your focus back to the father of the two sons.

As you hear the words of the parable,

Look at Rembrandt's painting...what words come to mind that would best describe the father...

This is a father who breaks all convention to meet his young son

--the same son who demanded not so long ago that his dad drop dead!

This is the father who pleads with his older son – get over your bitterness and feeling of entitlement

Can you not see how lavishly generous I have always been with you two boys?

Your younger brother did not “take” your share of the estate

I gave him what he would have received in due course.

Your portion of my estate is still intact – **all that is mine is yours**

PAUSE

The story ends with more questions left unanswered than resolved

Will this little family finally be reunited in unity and love?

Will the brothers be reconciled?

I wonder if Jesus does this because he wants to underline that this story is our story.

And our story is not yet fully written or complete is it?

For the whole of our earthly lives it will be asked of each of us – to whom do you belong – to God or to the world

Shall you be like the younger brother – searching for unconditional love and acceptance where it will never be found?

Shall you be like the older brother – consumed in bitterness and always crying – it's not fair.

I wonder – why is it that one of the greatest challenges in the spiritual life is to receive God's forgiveness,

To really, I mean really believe Jesus' words – I chose you.

I wonder – is it that we are so caught up in our own self-righteousness,

Fear of what others may think,

Of keeping up appearances that we are afraid to admit that so many of us are actually much farther from the living Lord than we think we are.

I wonder....

AMEN, thanks be to God