

Old Testament Lesson—Psalm 85

Lord, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. (Selah) You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger. Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us. Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation. Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.

New Testament Lesson—Luke 15:11-32

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

If you would be so kind...Fill in the blank for me please...

If you really love something, you'll ____ (let it go). Yep. You got it.

That's right. As the saying goes...If you truly love something (or someone), you'll let them go. Sometimes you might even hear a second part to this; something like "if it's meant to be, it'll come back. If it's meant to be, they'll return to you."

I suspect many of you have either received or offered this (rather cliché) bit of wisdom at some point in your life. And yeah...it's cliché because there's some truth to it. Right?

There are times when those we love and care for might need some space from us, which can be really difficult depending on a person's experience and how they're wired.

I've heard the old adage used to talk about the heart wrenching circumstances of a parent sending their baby off to college—that moment when the nest gets a little quieter. Success or failure is up to them; but you have to let them fly on their own.

Of course, I'd imagine that the *kind* of love being considered matters a great deal. "If you love something, let it go." I mean...Are we talking about a would-be pet here? Maybe a best friend we've had a falling out with? An estranged family member? Romantic partner? Something else? The particulars of the relationship are important.

I've also heard it used when a close family member is actively dying and those they love are anticipating the grief ahead of them. Sometimes the dying hold on until a spouse or child give them "permission" to go: "It's okay, mom. It's okay. We're okay."

Or perhaps someone you love is on life support; and you know their quality of life won't be the same even if they wake up. Or maybe your best furry friend is at that point where the most humane thing to do is to send them peacefully to sleep.

"If you love something, let it go." Easier said than done, perhaps...

At the risk of stating the obvious...Whenever any meaningful relationship in our life is substantially altered—either permanently or temporarily, an adjustment period will follow. And the deeper, the more significant the relationship is, (typically) the greater the transition to come.

As you know, we're taking the month of June to not only be honest about the changes we face, but also to intentionally seek out God's guidance during this time—taking in the wisdom of Scripture—asking, for example: How does Christ approach times of transition? What do his teachings have to say about our particular season of change?

In fact, I think a legitimate case could be made to say that the most essential question about the gospel has to do with change. In other words, a person can't encounter Christ Jesus and remain exactly as they are.

Actually, let me rephrase. I cannot claim Christ as my Lord and follow him to the best of my ability and remain unchanged. My entire identity is reshaped and reoriented by and through God's love. My decisions are made with Christ's teachings in mind—my steps ordered by the ones he's taken before me.

Or, as Paul says, anyone in Christ is a new creation. So yes: believing and implementing the gospel means navigating a massive transition, if not a total transformation.

Now, you'd be forgiven for not thinking of Luke's great parable as a story about change and transition. Actually, I think that's what makes it so special—so powerful—and so relatable...the parable can be looked at through a variety of lenses. Each of us can see ourselves in the text somewhere. Our experiences are reflected back at us through these characters.

There are so many angles—so many perspectives that bring this story to life. It's richly layered and complicated and just reeks of the messiness of humanity. Doesn't it?

And, to take it a step further, the person we relate to the most today may not be the person we relate to a year from now. In this way, Luke's parable is fluid and flexible and filled with wisdom for whatever stage of life we find ourselves.

I can tell you that, over the course of my life (at some point), I've felt a close affinity to the younger son, to the father, and most definitely to the older son. As an elder sibling, I know that self-righteous mindset all too well. (Who're my fellow eldest siblings out there?)

But, as I said, our gospel lesson really is a story about change and transition—actually multiple transitions. Because, isn't it true that during times like these, it's usually not just one thing? Isn't it usually several transitions that are stacked upon each other—changes compounding other changes?

I wanted to be sure to give you an image of this story we don't typically get to see. Most artistic portrayals look more like the cover of your bulletin than what's on the screen here. If you "Google" images of the prodigal son you'll get pictures of joy—with the outstretched arms of the father embracing his ashamed son—broken but returned.

You really have to go looking to find images like this—the younger son at his lowest point—dirty, hungry, and alone (except for the pigs whose stomachs are fuller than his).

By the way: It's worth pointing out that this young man doesn't come to his senses until he has absolutely no other choice—not if he wants to survive. There isn't an ounce of regret or shame or remorse until he's dead broke and starving.

We don't see any sign of contrition or self-criticism—not until it's the only option left. Y'all, it takes not only a "severe famine" that hits hard after our guy has already spent everything, but also the cruel lack of generosity—the emptiness of any hospitality among the community where the prodigal is.

Luke tells us that, at his most humiliating point, "no one gave him anything." No one cared. Why should they? Just another spoiled brat reaping what he's sown, perhaps. After all, what about the famine? Who's got food to spare—especially for someone so undeserving.

And then, there's the home he left behind—a home now less prosperous—the home that, for all intents and purposes, had ceased to exist. There's his brother—responsible as ever—who, let's not kid ourselves, would've preferred to remain an only child. Then there's his father, the one publicly shamed and declared to be dead by a son demanding an early inheritance.

Let's imagine, for a moment, the life of that household after the prodigal's callous and careless departure. Practically speaking, there would've been a reshuffling of responsibilities. Everything carried by the younger son would've been reassigned. In short, everyone's load was made heavier.

Financially speaking, parting with all those resources much earlier than expected would've strained the household—would've endangered the well-being and livelihoods of all the servants and livestock in their care.

Emotionally speaking, one imagines a devastated and heartbroken parent, a family name now stained with scandal, a legacy tarnished. I see a father who can no longer show his face in the community, a shame stamped permanently on his soul—all this shared by the older brother too...

Now, as a functional household, as an economic engine, they would've had to face some major adjustments. Now, operating with less human and financial resources, things would be necessarily different. Who knows if the family's public shame would've affected any future business dealings. No doubt: A painful transition was in store.

And yet...According to Luke...There's every reason to believe that they all rose to the occasion. Persisting through it all, there was still a place for the prodigal to return to. His home, though dead to him in a foreign land, was still alive.

As we know, the parable ends (for the most part), positively and with a resounding hopefulness. We know how the father responds. We know how *God* responds when we prodigals finally confess and come home after laying waste to the blessings we're given—after all the hurt and harm we've caused along the way. Even after all that...

Even after all that... We know the embrace that waits for us. We know the joyful celebration that reverberates in heaven.

We also know that, after the prodigal's return, another cycle of transitions will begin again—upsetting the status quo and probably irritating the heck out of a whole lot of people (case in point: older brother).

You see: This isn't just a story about God's forgiveness that's ours by grace no matter how far we wander. This is about how we receive the prodigals in our own stories. This is about what God expects of us when those who've let us down wander back into our lives—broken and hopeless. This is about us opening *our* arms. This is about the embrace *we* extend.

It's about forgiving our debtors, since our debts were already forgiven.

Now, I'm not saying or suggesting that any of that is easy. But I am saying it's thoroughly Christlike. I am saying the face of Christ is found on that of every prodigal who returns. And I am saying that welcoming back every sinner is, over and above, worth the transitions and adjustments we'll have to muddle through to make it happen.

It's worth it, my friends. It will be worth it. That's the good news of the gospel!

Consider, for instance, the prodigal's return in 1983. After countless transitions and too much heartache to name, Southern Presbyterians finally came home—returning from a place where they once squandered their efforts on slavery and Jim Crow.

And there was joy in heaven and earth—symbolized by a statement of faith written for the occasion—a statement we'll say together shortly.

I don't think we're naïve, siblings in Christ, to still hold on to the hope of that reunion forty-three years ago. For we know there are other prodigals yet to come home. Let's be bold and envision their change of heart. Perhaps we can manifest it with enough faith.

I have to believe that, if hearts can be turned away from racism and toward abolition, they can also be turned away from misogyny and toward affirming women's ordination. I have to believe that hearts can be turned away from homophobia and transphobia and toward celebrating the love and ministries of our queer siblings.

Mother of mercy: Imagine the possibilities when they recognize their sin and return!

But we have to extend the welcome embrace when that happens. We cannot afford to bear the grudge or lord it over them. Remember, we've all been prodigals before.

Remember still: everyone has a home to return to. So says the God who's made a home for you and me. It's never too late to come home. Not ever.

Amen.