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Whether it is our first encounter, or yet another gracious encounter in a long life with him, encountering Jesus Christ is a transformational experience. Before we are transformed, and as we are transformed in our life with Christ, we are un-formed. To be reshaped we must be softened, to be made new every part of us must be broken down first. There are few stories in Holy Scripture that un-form us, reshape us, and break every part of us down as efficiently as what we call the “Parable of the Prodigal Son.” This parable is more than a story. It is a complete paradigm shift, a game changer, a reset of our default settings about God, Christian faith, and life.

As we reflect on this story this morning, it is helpful to remember that the chapter divisions and chapter headings in our Bibles are not original to the texts or the stories themselves, and are actually quite modern. Jesus did not sit down and say to his disciples, “the title of this parable is the ‘Parable of the Prodigal Son.’” That is a name we have given it, with good reason. Some of our difficulty in understanding the meaning of this parable is that the emphasis on the prodigal son found in the title draws us away from the full meaning of the parable. In part because of this title and the emphasis on the prodigal son, I heard this story growing up and received it as a moral tale, no doubt with the help of the church. Don’t do drugs, stay in school, get a good job, be like the older brother. God can still reach screw ups, but don’t do bad things. Clearly, the offense of this story is that, if we take it seriously, it actually undermines that kind of moralism. This is not a moral tale, and that is part of what makes it so offensive.

Were I asked to change the title of the parable, the first title I might suggest is a clunky one that speaks directly to the context of the Parable: “The Parable of Israel’s Inability to Rejoice

that God Has Come to Save Bad Jews as well as Gentiles, in Jesus Christ.” This parable is told as part of a lengthy lamentation over Jerusalem’s coming rejection of Jesus, culminating in his murder on the cross. At the heart of their rejection of Jesus is his embrace of those who they consider unfaithful, and even their enemies. Jesus tells a parable about a great banquet where the host must go out and find the crippled, the poor, the lame, and the blind to sit at the table, because the dignified, invited guests are too preoccupied to come to a party. Jesus tells a parable about the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep behind, in order to find one sheep who is lost, and another about a woman with ten coins, who loses one and literally turns her life and home upside down to find it, though she still has nine other coins. While the shepherd and the woman can rejoice at finding one who was lost, the Pharisees cannot. The Pharisees are the invited guests who do not come to the banquet. They are the 99 sheep. They are the 9 coins that were never lost.

They are also the older brother. Jesus has come to offer unconditional, gracious love to Pharisees, yes, but also to the worst Jews, and to Gentiles. Like the eldest son, the Pharisees stand in disbelief of Jesus’ embrace of people who are not like them, “many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.” Jesus, if this is how you treat prodigals, what the hell was all that law-keeping for? If this is what you are saying about God, why are we even Pharisees?

Pharisaism is not a description of an attitude of one religious group at one time in history, it is a description of the human condition, particularly human beings in the church. This leads us to another title suggestion for this parable, “The Parable About the Older Brother Who Does Not Understand His Father.” The Church specializes in manufacturing elder sons. Some of us have prodigal son stories, and we love those stories in the church, provided the prodigals become

older brothers, just like the rest of us. It is a great bait-and-switch that you find in every Christian tradition. Grace and love can get you in the church, but if you want to stick around, you better shape up and start working for it. We can sympathize with the Pharisees, can't we? If the basis of life with the father is simply the father's love and nothing else, Pharisees, elder brothers, Christians like us feel like something is being taken away from us. A piece of our identity is being stolen, and Jesus is the one who is taking it.

I often hear questions in the church that reveal how much we struggle to embrace the thinking of this parable. If we take this parable seriously, what is keeping us from falling into moral relativism just like other mainline churches? Why should anyone in the church give time and money to the church, if God embraces prodigals? Why should anyone come to church at all? Does our world really need a message of unconditional love? We need justice, we need accountability, and we need fairness, so that people finally get what they deserve. I have heard all of those things said in the church by people in holy orders and lay people alike. The church is very good at producing elder brothers.

To those questions I would respond this way. Did the mainline churches fall into moral relativism because the good news of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection was preached too boldly, or with too much clarity? Do people lose interest in the church and stop giving time and money to it, because they find too much authentic grace in the church? Is the problem with the world really that there is too much one-way love extended to enemies, or can the world's problems be boiled down to the fact that we seek our own justice, accountability, and fairness, instead of allowing God to do that impossible work? Does anyone really think the love of the father in this parable is the problem with the church or the world? I certainly do not think so.

The surest sign that we understand the basis for our relationship with God, a relationship which is never fair, always moves in one direction, that blows our understanding of justice and fairness to pieces, is that we are willing to rejoice at God's love for someone else, even someone who has hurt us, and even when it robs us of our identity as so-called "good people," and as the people with access to God. That is precisely what is exposed about the older brother in his response to his younger brother's return. He never understood his father, and he still does not understand his father. The basis of his relationship with him has always been love, precisely the same love extended to his younger brother. The older brother is never worthy of our imitation, though the church often implicitly teaches that he is. He is not, and if we fail to allow this scandalous story to break older brothers like us down, we too will be left outside of the celebration.

Perhaps another title for this parable could be, "The Parable of the Love of a Father that is Extended Without Any Need to Control His Son, Without Any Expectation That His Love Will Be Returned." We often fail to appreciate the true meaning of the younger son's request at the start of the parable: "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me." That share of property should come to the younger son only after his father dies, he is asking to receive his inheritance. "Dad, I do not care if you are alive or dead. You are as good as dead to me, now give me what I care about, my inheritance."

If one of our children says to us, "I hate you, I want you to die, give me some money" who among us would respond to that child with a gracious gift? Parenting books be damned, the horrible, cruel, wicked request of the prodigal son becomes an occasion for the father to extend self-giving love, mercy, and grace to him. The father gives the son what he is asking for. He does not need to control the outcome of his giving, he simply gives. He knows that his son is in a bad

place when he asks for his inheritance. He knows the intentions of his son's heart, he knows that his son will squander it, and trample on this gracious gift. Nevertheless, he shows his power in making himself vulnerable to his son, and he gives without question, and he gives without expectation of return, and he gives without a need to control the outcome of his giving.

Later on in this story when we see the father running to his son to greet him on the road from a great distance, we witness a response that is entirely consistent with who the father has proven himself to be before. He runs to his son and embraces him before the son is even able to speak his carefully curated confession and apology. For all the father knows, his deadbeat son has only come back to ask for more money, not to ask for forgiveness and another chance, yet he still meets him on the road with a compassionate, loving embrace. While his son's reasonable expectation would be that his father's love is based on the condition of his apology, his father embraces before the son apologizes. Every move the father makes is self-emptying. The father empties himself every step of the way, he is always self-giving, even to his own detriment. He does not control, he does not manipulate, he does not attach his gift to fearful consequences, he just gives of himself. The son's journey to the bottom gives him eyes to see his father as he really is. True life is not found where he looked for it before, but in the arms of his father.

Like most of the Priests and Pastors that I know, Henri Nouwen felt angry and bitter after a few years in the Priesthood. He was angry at his people for not responding to his ministry the way he wanted them to respond. He was angry at God for putting him in that situation. This dark season led Nouwen to meditate on this parable, by way of meditation on Rembrandt's famous painting of this parable, which led to a powerful book about this parable. In his meditations, Nouwen tried to find himself in the story as we all do, to discover if he was really a prodigal son, or an older brother. With the help of a close spiritual friend, Nouwen discovered that, "whether

you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father...after all my years of living with the painting and looking at the old man holding his son, it had never occurred to me that the father was the one who expressed most fully my vocation in life...look at the Father in the painting and you will know who you are called to be.” Whatever son we are as we encounter this parable, we are called to become the father.

The current statistics for seminary trained clergy are that over 80% of them leave ministry within ten years, and that statistic seems to have gotten worse since 2020. There are many reasons for that, but I believe that this staggering statistic is in part due to the fact that many clergy fail to appreciate what Nouwen learned through meditating on this story. Clergy are called to live like the father in their vocation as Shepherds. By extending love, humility, and vulnerability to others that often moves only in one direction, that is easily trampled on and taken advantage of, and that is not always appreciated. That is simply what Christian ministry looks like, like it or not.

Of course, Pastors always have the option of changing our strategy to reach better outcomes. That is always a strong temptation. After all, look where Jesus’ self-emptying strategy got him, a humiliating death on a cross. Ministry can become a ministry of control, power, fear, and lording authority over others, which is not really Christian ministry at all. You can slap a collar, some vestments, and a title on it, it does not make it so. I do not share this so that you will feel sorry for Priests, or because I think I do this all that well. I spent most of my week thinking about the fact that I do not do it as well as I would like to. I share this because the call to the self-emptying life of the father is not extended only to clergy, but to all Christians who have themselves received such a love from God. The vocation of life like the father is simply the Christian vocation.

Now, if you hear that and think, “there is no way I can do that,” thank you. Thank you for your honesty, and thank you for your ability to know yourself. If you think, “great, I do that already,” you are standing in the eldest son’s shoes. Just as a ministry that is not based on self-giving love is not Christian ministry, a life based on something else is not really Christian either. Other ways of living are always strong temptations. Look where Jesus’ self-emptying life got him. A humiliating death on a cross, and who wants that? Alternatively, we can control, manipulate, use fear and intimidation, or lord ourselves over others, to reach more desirable outcomes. We can slap Christian words, slogans, causes, and bumper sticks on a life like that to make it look like the Christian life, but that does not make it so.

The love of the father that we are called to participate in is always other-worldly, radical, alien, and beyond our abilities to conjure up in ourselves, however well-meaning we might be. This love for others cannot be willed. It cannot be conjured up emotionally, or discovered through our effort and hard work. It cannot be received or taught as a command that we are then obedient to through our own energy and strength. The love of the father is a love that comes from outside of us, always. Were we able to ever produce this love in ourselves, God would not have needed to come and die for us.

Here is my final title suggestion, the most meaningful title of all, “The Parable of the Prodigal God.” I did not make that title up, and that is the title of a wonderful book by the Manhattan based Pastor Tim Keller. Henri Nouwen ends his reflection on this parable with the same thought, that this parable is great news because it is the story of a prodigal God, and Jesus Christ is the Prodigal Son. You may be thinking, “how can Jesus be the prodigal son? Jesus never sins.”

Exactly, he does not, but he stands in the place of those who do. The self-emptying love of Jesus the son is grounded in the self-emptying love of the father. Jesus left the riches of his father's home for a far off country. He emptied himself and took the form of a slave, spending time with us in our filthy world. He fed pearls of wisdom to human beings, and like pigs we trampled them. We even crucified him. Tim Keller puts it this way, "Jesus Christ, who had all the power in the world, saw us enslaved by the very things we thought would free us. So he emptied himself of his glory and became a servant." After his own rock-bottom moment, when he literally goes into the pits of human experience by descending to hell, Jesus also returns to his father's house like the prodigal son, and in that return there is much rejoicing from the father. For Jesus does not return alone, though that in and of itself would be cause for rejoicing. Jesus returns with those who are in him along with him, whether they are older brothers, or prodigals. Henri Nouwen says, "there is no journey to God outside of the journey Jesus made." We cannot get to God without God first coming to us.

This is the only place where we can find the power that will enable us to love others as the father loves the prodigal. It is the only power in the whole world that is unleashed by humbling ourselves. The only power exercised from our knees. The only way to live into our calling to be the father is to know ourselves in his embrace, as prodigal children. The Christian vocation is living like the father, and that is only attainable by living like the prodigal son at the end of the story. On our knees, in his embrace, the place where we find our true life. On our knees in his embrace, that is where we know who we are, and whose we are.

We are nearing Good Friday. We are walking to Jerusalem with Jesus, where every step brings us closer to the moment when we will either abandon him because we realize we have backed the wrong horse, or where we will shout with the crowd "crucify him!" allowing a guilty

man to walk free in Jesus' place, so that Jesus takes the place of a guilty man. We know what we will do to him. We know what we have done to him. More importantly, he knows what we will do to him. He knows what we have done to him. Will that knowledge prevent him from loving us today? Will it keep him from being known to us in our holy food? Will that knowledge keep him from emptying himself for us? Did God come down to us and love us because he thought that we would receive it well, or did he come down and love us, knowing that we will crucify him? Does our inability to receive his perfect love alter that perfect love in any way? Absolutely not. "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him." Amen.