

Irrational Exuberance

Luke 15:1-32

March 14, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

Luke 15:1-32 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸ "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." ¹¹ Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ 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! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.' ²² 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. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him! ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² 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.'"

"Whatever you may be sure of, be sure of this," James Russell Lowell wrote, "You are dreadfully like other people."

That's a hard knowledge. It rankles. We don't want to be like everyone else. We want to be special, unique. We want to be the heroes of the stories we tell about ourselves. We want to be the kind of person the likes of which the world has never before seen! But at a fundamental level, we remain persons who need to love and be loved and, like everyone else, are often careless in our decisions and desperate in our dreams.

Being dreadfully alike, however, does not mean remaining forever the same, or else what is this journey of faith for? What good is a lifetime if we don't grow? As an ancient Hindu proverb puts it, "There is nothing noble in being superior to some other person; the true nobility is in being superior to your former self."

When I read this story of the father and the two sons, I am reminded how often the new person we pray to become is blocked by our inner struggles around forgiveness and community. Deeply rooted in each of our hearts is a profound need to love and be loved. Alongside that need, though, lie hard notions of self-justification and blame.

This parable navigates this emotional and spiritual territory. Its traditional title – *The Prodigal Son* – is unhelpful. *Prodigal* means wasteful, and in this story there are two wasteful sons each wandering bitterly in their own spiritual wasteland and a loving father prodigious in grace and irrationally exuberant in joy.

Ken Bailey, a Presbyterian missionary and teacher in the Middle East, brings new clarity to our understanding of this parable by applying his knowledge of the culture of the region. Bailey says he has told this story all over the Middle East and each person has had the same reaction: by asking for his *inheritance* the younger is saying to his father he wishes he were dead.

The older son, by remaining silent and accepting his own portion of the inheritance is complicit in this outrageously disrespectful and dishonorable request. Both sons are alienated from the father; they are one flesh in the spirit of spite and ingratitude.

It is easiest to note the younger son's waywardness; he's the one who leaves. More difficult is to recognize the faithlessness of the elder son because it comes disguised as morality, responsibility, and righteousness. A better name for it is self-righteousness, of course – hostile, graceless, and alienating. Clearly, though only one son left the country, both sons were very far away from the father.

The younger son leaves and despite himself he grows, he changes, and he changes direction. So often it is only from a distance we are able to see what we couldn't see up close. So often we don't realize what we have until it is gone. Is his just a conversion of the stomach or is it of the heart also? Let's assume both, and in that order. It takes only the lowest of animal instincts to react to the growling of the stomach; it takes courage and heart to respond to the ache in the soul. He turns around and heads home, desperately hoping home will have him. He is ready to humiliate himself before his father whom he has humiliated earlier.

But, his older brother hasn't moved, geographically or spiritually. His heart is heavy with self-righteous rage. What hope is there for a man like that whose scorekeeping soul defines life in terms of its pains and losses, whose soul feeds on the failures of others? As George Buttrick put it, "While the younger son was prodigal in body, at least part of his heart was always at home; but the elder brother was prodigal at heart, and only his body was at home."

And so the redemptive curve of the story arcs back to the beginning. The prodigal has rehearsed his lines; he has carefully composed his speech of repentance. To his credit, he does not intend to cover himself with excuses. He does not try to saunter casually back into the family's graces pretending nothing has happened, as so often happens in relationships where honesty is a stranger.

It is the conclusion of the parable that shows us this is no simple morality story. The lad doesn't get to utter one word of his carefully rehearsed speech before his father has overwhelmed him with a joyous welcome. "While he was still far off," Jesus says, "his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."

Ken Bailey's Middle East perspective on this remarkable turn of events tells us that a son of the village returning from a long debauch would have suffered the spiteful taunts and abuse from a lengthy gauntlet of angry townspeople. Secondly, the father being a man of means would have occupied a prestigious position in the town. He would have been a person of great dignity and solemn bearing. The idea that this noble and patriarchal figure, dressed in flowing robes and accompanied by a retinue of servants, would run full tilt out to the edge of town to protect his profligate son from the much-deserved wrath of the townsfolk is an incredible and powerful image of a love willing and eager to sacrifice anything to welcome back the lost.

All of which darkens ever more deeply the plight of the elder brother. Only the fatted calf was more unhappy that the younger brother had returned home. Party noises pulsate from within the house, while outside the elder brother stands seething, enraged, and alone. Just as the father ran to welcome the prodigal home, so the father abandons dignity to go seek the elder son who is lost in the wilderness of resentment. It is at the double ending of the story – first, when the younger son returns, and then when the elder brother refuses to share the joy of the father – that we hear the connection among all three of the parables. The sheep, the coin, the son were lost, but now found. "Rejoice with me!" each principal character says. The lost was found; what was dead has been raised!

If you find this an offensive story, if you think it stands fairness on its head, and if your sense of righteousness and rectitude feels violated, please take a

seat over there among the Pharisees and scribes, the people among whom, you remember, Jesus tells this story. They comprised a whole congregation of elder brothers. There they stood, pillars of the community, a festering phalanx of family values, good people in the worst sense of the word. As Luke puts it, “And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This (Jesus) fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

We see it all around us, and in us, the spirit of vengefulness, the rage for righteousness, the lust for blaming and shaming. It fills our politics; it fractures families. It consumed the elder son. And, it leads to the moralistic interpretation of the parable that has traditionally dominated the church. Shame on the younger son! Good for the elder son standing for what is responsible and right! And, while we’re venting our spleen, what a doddering old fool of a doormat that father is! Whatever happened to standards, decency, morality?

Another interpretation of the parable is romantic, the heart thrilling at the sight of the father running to greet the prodigal. What delights the romantic nauseates the righteous, and so the parable both delights and offends. We lose our footing, wedged in a spiritual chasm between self-righteousness and grace. Both the sappy romantic and the rigid moralist miss the point – God’s exuberant welcome return of the lost, God’s joy at life being wrested from death. Luke has been called “The Gospel of the Outcast.” Only in Luke do we find the story of Zaccheus the despised tax collector whose life is completely changed by Jesus’ welcome. Only in Luke do we hear of the outcast Good Samaritan showing God’s mercy for a man viciously attacked on the road. Only in Luke is the story told of a dishonest manager of someone else’s money who is commended for his cunning skill. And here, only in Luke do we hear the story of two brothers – one profligate and wandering, and one dutiful and rigid – who each dangerously stretch the cords of the father’s love but cannot diminish the father’s joy at return.

We hear of lost sheep and lost coins and lost chances all found whole and healed and hopeful again by virtue of a grace and a love that not only goes to any length to seek and to welcome, but is freely given at no cost and no obligation, save that we trust it to be adequate for all we need and all we need to give.

This is the heart of the gospel. No one is a lost cause, no one is an outcast. You may be unable to forgive yourself, but God forgives you. Are you lost in a seething resentment against someone, suffering in a self-righteous anguish that you have lost something and he or she has gained? Are you being crucified upon a cross of jealousy, disappointment, dashed dreams? Is your soul hungry for release from all that? It takes only a little bit of courage, only a tentative trust, to take those hesitant steps back toward the Father who, upon but the merest glimpse of your tears, will come running to you in welcome.

The feast is prepared; it is set for you and me and all who wander, that we may live again.