

Sunday of the Prodigal Son: Relationships and Repentance: A Tale of *Two* Prodigals

A sermon by the Rev. Fr. David G. Subu
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GOSPEL: *Luke 15:11-32*

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Christ is among us!

Today we make our approach towards Great Lent and the glorious Resurrection of Christ with the reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, that each of us might “come to ourselves” and return to our Heavenly Father. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is at its core about relationships and inter-connectedness, through and through. It is also about perception. From this Parable we learn how our fallen humanity comes to perceive itself and its God in comparison to how God sees us and loves us. We learn this not only from the younger son, but also the older son in the parable, in how they relate to their father and vice versa.

Let us first consider the younger son. He is the image every soul that falls into sin. His fall first requires him to make a startling redefinition of his relationships. The Gospel tells us that “the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.’ So he divided to them his livelihood.” What this means is that the younger son asked for his share of the inheritance. Now, when do we normally receive our inheritance? Only after someone dies, of course! By asking for his inheritance, the younger son was essentially asking to redefine his life and his relationship to his father as if the father were already dead. Though he probably did not feel that way, and may have loved his father very much, he was nonetheless asking to go about the rest of his life as if that relationship was over. He would be free to do and to live as he pleased, to say like the song, “It’s my life!” That’s exactly what happened, as we read the next verse, “¹³“And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.”

Now how is this in image of the sinner? First, each of us begins an innocent child of God, created in His image and likeness, “adorned with all His gifts of Grace,” (Prayer before the Thrice Holy Hymn). Yet when we sin we not only squander those gifts and spend away that innocence and beauty, we also have to essentially redefine our relationship to God. Like the younger son, for us to walk away from God and willingly sin, we must choose to live as if God no longer exists—that He is dead. We may not say this or believe this explicitly or consciously, but in essence, to sin is to act as if God is no longer there and no longer our Father. We have to willfully put out of mind the knowledge that He is watching us, that He has commanded us how to live and expects our obedience. We become much like a little child who comes to think that if Daddy doesn’t see his or her disobedience then he or she should get away with it. The child is then indignant when they get into trouble anyway, protesting; “But Daddy, you didn’t see me!” not realizing that such a statement is as good as a confession! But if even earthly parents seem to have eyes in the back of their heads, how much more so our Father who is in Heaven?

In sin we sever in our own minds our relationship with our heavenly Father and we seek to be independent of Him and our fellows. We seek to do our own will on earth, and forget about “as it is in heaven.” Eventually, our fall catches up with us, and we find ourselves in want—in want because if we live for sin we grow increasingly dependent on its effect and decreasingly satisfied with it, falling deeper and deeper, but also in want because we still hold within us that image of God which reminds us of the original beauty and innocence that God created us to be. We want for meaning and purpose, we want for inter-connectedness and relationship again, we want for our sense of belonging and family with our fellow human beings and with God, even if we cannot clearly identify these desires. In the life of slavery to sin, we eventually fall so far that we would accept to be treated worse than swine, and to live no longer as sons but as slaves to an uncaring master. But that image of God within us cannot be trampled away no matter how far we fall, and God grants us the opportunity to return. As the priest prays in the liturgy before the singing of “Holy God,” “You give wisdom and understanding to him that asks and do not despise the sinner but have instituted repentance for salvation.” (Prayer before the Trisagion, *Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*). Thus in time, the younger man “came to himself.”

¹⁷“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ¹⁸‘I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, ¹⁹“and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”’

In his mind, the younger son still has a father after all. In coming to himself, he realizes his error of ever having left his father as if dead in the first place. But he no longer has the hope of being considered a son. Having in essence disowned his father by his actions, he expects the same in return, and hopes only perhaps that he will be able to survive in the role of a servant. How often do we sinners feel the same way? Having turned our backs on God so many times and so easily, we expect the same treatment from Him! It is like the song verse, “it’s no secret that a liar won’t believe anybody else.” (U2, *The Fly*) How does someone who has lived without trust and in fear of dependence turn and throw their trust and hope for survival into the hands of a father that they have themselves abandoned! Yet is this not the great leap of faith we must all make?

The beautiful truth is that even though we play all these games in our minds about who and where God is and what our relationship is to him, He does not. He does not turn away from those who turn to Him. As St. Paul writes to Timothy, “If we deny Him, He will also deny us,” but, “If we are faithless, He remains faithful, [for] He cannot deny Himself.” While we are in a state of denial, that is, denying God’s fatherhood in our life and choosing to live in sin, God allows it, even though he does not approve of it. But even then He does not lose *faith*, and remains awaiting our eventual return. We see this in the Gospel:

²⁰“And [the younger son] arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. ²¹“And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²“But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. ²³‘And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; ²⁴‘for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry.

Even before the son is able to get out his utterance of repentance, even before he confess his sins, his father has already had compassion on him, embraced and received him. This should encourage us whenever we doubt whether we should confess our sins or not. Even though the son had acted as if the father had died, the opposite was in fact true: “This, my son, was dead and is alive again; he was lost and

is found.” Each of us repeats the same event: when we sin, and try to act as if God were dead and gone, but it is we ourselves who are spiritually dead. God remains alive and remains our Father. Even though we may not believe ourselves worthy of being called sons, and that recognition of unworthiness is an essential part of our coming to the knowledge of ourselves, God has already received us back and restored to us the honor and beauty we once had.

Now this story is called the prodigal son—the son who wasted his life and his relationship with his father. And usually, we associate the younger son as the prodigal, because he is called as much by his older brother. But “prodigal is as prodigal does,” to paraphrase Forrest Gump’s mama, and in the end we see that the younger son does not remain lost but is found. Yet there is another son, an older brother. Let us see how he defines himself and his relationship to his father.

²⁵“Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶“So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷“And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’ ²⁸“But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. ²⁹“So he answered and said to his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. ³⁰‘But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’

If we look closely we can see that the older brother makes two important definitions of his relationships. First he describes his own relationship to the father. “‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time.’” His relationship is essential that of a servant—one who follows orders, one who serves. Note that he does not say, “Father,” only “you” this and “you” that. He refuses to enter the house, even when the father pleads with him. Now who is the one denying his relationship to the father? The second relationship he defines is the one to his brother. He does not say, “My brother,” but rather, “This son of yours.” He cannot bear to call the younger man his brother nor can he bear to call his parent “Father.” This set of definitions is rejected by the father, he denies his older son’s denial, and chooses to keep the faith, saying, “‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. ³²‘It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.’ ” The father reaffirms that the older is both a son and a brother.

We don't know if the older brother repented and return with his father, coming to himself and recognizing that he too was a prodigal. Certainly, Jesus told this parable not only to encourage the publicans and sinners of the day but also to chastise the self-righteous—those who did not yet realize their own brokenness and poverty of spirit before the Lord. Each of us two must be wary lest we fall into the same temptation. All of us our prodigals, all of us have wasted so much of our lives in futile and meaningless pursuits. All of us have fallen short of the glory of God. And all of us are in need of the relationship with our Father in heaven. Let us pray to the Lord: may all of us rush to embrace You, O Lord, knowing that even though we have sinned “against heaven and before you,” and are no longer worthy to be called your sons and daughters, yet hoping nonetheless in your unspeakable love and mercy, trusting in you to save and heal us. For You are the God of those who sin and the savior of those who do wrong and to You we offer glory, to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever, amen.