

"The Waiting Father"

"... for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

Every day, he was there, watching a waiting. It didn't matter if it was sunny or raining, hot or cold, summer or winter. From sunrise to sunset, he sat in the same chair on the front porch, staring down the road that led to the house. He barely left his seat, vacating it for short meal breaks and when he finally went to bed at night; but otherwise, he remained at his post, watching and waiting. It got to the point where his elder son had to assume responsibilities for managing the estate, supervising the servants and taking care of the family business that the father had managed so well for so many years. But ever since his younger son left home, the father took his place on the front porch like a sentinel, watching and waiting for the prodigal son to return.

Everything had changed on that fateful day when the younger son came to his father and demanded that he *"give me the share of the property that will belong to me."* (Luke 15:12). Such a demand was both disrespectful and irregular; the son was breaking his family ties and treating his father as though he were already dead. But instead of rejecting the son's request and reprimanding him for being so outrageously disrespectful, without hesitation that father divided his property between elder and the younger son. For the younger son, this is the beginning of a progressive estrangement from his family, mismanagement of his inheritance, and descent into poverty and privation. Instead of carefully managing the inheritance that it had taken his father so long to earn, *"the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living."* (15:13). When the last of the inheritance had been squandered, *"a severe famine took place throughout that land,"* which only hastened his impoverishment. The scion of a wealthy landowner had sunk so low that his only means of earning a living were to hire himself out *"to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs."* Swine were and are an abomination to observant Jews (*"The pig, for even though it has divided hoofs and is cleft-footed, it does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you."* – Leviticus 11:7). The rabbis had declared that *"none may raise swine anywhere"* and *"cursed be the man who would breed swine."* So desperate was the young man's fall that not only did he find himself in such a forbidden position, but that he was so hungry that *"he would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating,"* carob pods used primarily as feed but eaten by human beings in times of famine. The once-wealthy heir was in such a desperate place that even pig feed looked appealing, for *"no one gave him anything."*

The prodigal's return begins in the mire of the swine pen. *"He came to himself"* marks the moment in which he reclaims his identity:

- "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 as one of your hired hands.'" – 15:17-19.

No longer deserving to be called his father's son, he nevertheless resolves to leave that place of desolation and return to his own land and his father, as did Jacob in Genesis 32:9 (*"O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good.'*"). When the prodigal son "came to himself," he was affirming the human capacity to renounce foolish error and reclaim his heritage and potential. It was an act of repentance, which *"means learning to say 'Abba' again, putting one's whole trust in heavenly Father, returning to the Father's house and the Father's arms."* (Joachim Jeremias).

When the prodigal rises from the mire of the pig sty and sets off on his journey, he probably has no idea that ever since he left home his father has been watching and waiting for his return. Long after many people would have given up their watch post, the father looked down the road in hope that one day he would see his son's return. After many days of disappointment, one day the father saw the faint image of a man walking in his direction. At first, he couldn't identify who was making this journey; but as the traveler drew closer, the father recognized the face of his son and "*was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.*" (15:20). In ancient Israel, it was regarded as unbecoming – a loss of dignity – for a grown man to run; yet the father set aside all concern for propriety and ran. He was moved by compassion, and "*it was his joy that carried him down the road to the younger son.*" (Alan Culpepper). The kiss was an expression of forgiveness, as when David kissed Absalom in 2 Samuel 14:33 ("*So he came to the king and prostrated himself with his face to the ground before the king; and the king kissed Absalom.*").

The son starts his rehearsed speech ("*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*"), but the father interrupts him and gives instructions to his servants, publically receiving the son back into his house and signaling to all that he is to be treated as his son again. His return reestablishes his place as his father's son; all are to rejoice with the father whose days of watching and waiting are over, for "*this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!*"

But while the household begins to celebrate, not everyone is pleased by the return of the prodigal son. The elder son, who had remained loyal to his father and had taken his father's place in managing the estate during the older man's period of watching and waiting, refuses to join in the feast. His anger and alienation from his family is evident in his refusal to address the older man as "Father," as had the younger son. When the father came out and pleaded with him to join in the celebration, the elder son curtly answers in the midst of his outrage and betrayal:

- "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!" – 15:29-30.

Not only does he refuse to address the older man as "Father," but he also refers to his brother as "your son." In the midst of his rage, the elder son acts as if he has been disowned by his own family.

In his response, the father seeks to restore all of the relationships in his family, defend himself against the charge of injustice toward the elder son, and justify celebrating the younger son's return:

- "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." – 15:31-32.

The father intentionally uses the words "son" and "brother" to reinforce the family ties that have not been broken in spite of the elder son's feelings of abandonment and betrayal. As the father had never given up on his prodigal son, neither had he turned his back on the son who faithfully stood by his side; both were children whom the father loved fully and completely. For the waiting father, it was as necessary to celebrate the reconciliation of his family as it was for the Lord to "*rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.*" (Zephaniah 3:17).

This parable of the father and his two sons is the third in a series of parables that Jesus teaches in response to the grumblings of the Pharisees and scribes who objected to Jesus' habit of being one who "*welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" (15:2). The first parable invites us to consider what we would do if, "*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?" (15:4). In the second parable, a woman who has lost one of her ten silver coins searches diligently until she has found the lost coin. The finding of the lost things leads to celebration, inviting friends and neighbours to *"rejoice with me, for I have found the sheep/coin that was lost."* Jesus ends both of these parables with the teaching that *"there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."* (15:7).

If the three parables in Luke 15 are the center of Luke's Gospel, then the third parable might be considered the "paragon of the parables." Most people know this story as the parable of the Prodigal Son, focusing on the actions of the wayward young man who learns a hard lesson and is welcomed back home in spite of his misbegotten youth. But if we look at the parable again, we notice that the main character is not the prodigal son, nor is it the elder, faithful son; the person at the heart of this parable is the waiting father, an image of the manner in which our Lord watches and waits for God's wayward children to come home.

- "No other image has come closer to describing the character of God than the waiting father, peering down the road longing to see his son's return, then springing to his feet and running to meet him." – Alan Culpepper.

While there is not title for this or any other parable in any of the Gospels, the title "Prodigal Son" has been attached to it in part because many of us might identify with the situation of the younger child. We may feel like we have strayed and wandered from home, turning our back on family and friends to strike out to some unknown country that may have seemed attractive but whose luster faded soon after our arrival. We may find ourselves so far from home, exiled from those we love, lost and alone that we cry out how *"in foolishness [we] have squandered your legacy of grace."* We may feel that we are no longer worthy to be called children of God, no longer worthy to enter into the presence of our Lord and into the house of God where once we were so welcomed. But the message of the parable is that God is our Waiting Father, the one who watches and waits as God calls us to come home, where God will *"stretch out your hand in blessing, in pardon, and in peace."* (ELW Hymn 606). God is the "Lovesick Father" who is calling us *"earnestly, tenderly [to] come home."*

- "What blocks forgiveness is not God's reticence – 'But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him' – but ours. God's arms are always extended; we are the ones who turn away." – Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace.*

On the other hand, we may also identify with the elder son, the one who was always loyal yet feels betrayed when his father throws a lavish feast for the wayward son who turned his back on their father and squandered his fortune. We may be the ones who have always been faithful and loyal, doing all that has been asked of us, never turning our backs on God nor seeking anything extraordinary. There is an inherent unfairness in the story; why are our efforts being ignored while the lack of effort on the part of others is being lauded? We may feel as alienated as the elder son felt that day, unable to even consider the prodigals among us as our brothers and sisters. For us, God's message is that we have always enjoyed the fullness of God's blessings; in fact, our faithfulness has allowed us to share in this abundance that those who have turned away from God denied for themselves. But God's blessings are not given to us on the basis of what we do in return for the love of God; in the words of Robert Farrar Capon, *"If the world could have been saved by good bookkeeping, it would have been saved by Moses, not Jesus."* Even those of us who consider ourselves faithful and steadfast – "the pillars of the church" – must confess that we have also sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and that at times we have been as prodigal as those whose waywardness is more evident than ours. As the father waited for his younger son to come home from a long distance, so also does the father wait for his elder son to return home and join in the feast, even if his journey is only a few short steps.

- “We have all been ‘prodigals’ in one way or another, and it is the experience of God’s compassion and mercy and love that has transformed us from the inside out, and it is continuing to make all the difference in our lives until we fully become that ‘new creation’ that is promised by Jesus’ death and resurrection.” – Alan Brehm.

The father’s time of watching and waiting ended when his younger son returned home; but we do not know if he was able to experience his elder son’s returning to the family table. For our Lord, the time of waiting continues; our God watches and waits for us to come home, to heed the call to *“return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”* Our Father is watching and waiting, longing to see our faces again, softly and tenderly calling all of us to come home. Amen.