

May 22, 2010 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
Romans 5:17-19 The Prodigal God: Two Lost Sons by Andy
McDonald

Last week we started this series called “The Prodigal God.” We began by looking at the warm up stories the first two stories Jesus told in Luke 15, the story about the lost sheep and how if you lost one you would go looking for it until you found it and then there would be a great celebration. In a second illustration Jesus told about a lost coin and the search for it and rejoicing when it was found.

We ended last weeks service with a version of the “Sinners’ Prayer that simply acknowledged that we wanted to be found, and to surrender and let God find us, just as we are.

The third of Jesus’ parables in Luke 15 is the longer story, and one of the most familiar in all the Bible, and the story which will be the direct focus for the rest of this series.

Every year or two at my age, I’m supposed to get a physical check up with the doctor. Like many of you, I don’t really look forward to this. I have some of that immature thinking where I tell myself that if I feel okay why would I go stir up trouble by asking the doctor to go poking around. If I don’t know I have an ailment I can just pretend it away in my ignorance. It’s sort of like not knowing about a problem means not having a problem. Of course this is so not true. I don’t really want to be ignorant so I go for my check up.

An important part of the physical check up is the labs, the blood work. Labs are important because they are great diagnostic tools. They help the doctor see beyond the surface and diagnose the problem. They get at the core of problems that might otherwise go unnoticed.

That’s a little bit like how I want us to use our story today. In this narrative, this lab work, most often called the parable of the prodigal son, I want us to discover both humanity’s disease and the protocol for a full cure.

Jesus told the story that day with care. This wasn't an absentminded thrown together illustration. Carefully he crafted the story starting with these words, "A man had two sons." And with that simple intro our minds say, "Tell me more." That's the whole introduction and Jesus jumps right into the plot.

One day the younger son told his Father, "I wish you were dead!" Well those weren't his exact words but that was the message. It was cold, it was disrespectful, it was arrogant and it was cruel. His actual words were, "I want my share of your estate now, instead of waiting until you die."

Jesus' original audience would have expected the next part of the story to be very different. This was a culture where Dad was nearly worshipped. Serious respect of the elders would have justified the Father if he had kicked the son out of the house with nothing but the clothes on his back. The bold demand would be expected to earn not his inheritance but full disinheritance as response to his rudeness.

This was a request, or more of a demand, that would disgrace the family in the community because of this younger son's extraordinary disrespect for his father.

There wouldn't just be social standing consequences, but in order to fulfill this request it would mean a change in the economic standing of the family. Most of the Father's wealth wasn't probably liquid but rather most of it was tied up in property. This father's wealth was part of his family heritage. It was the land on which he was raised. It wasn't just some investment property it was "their" land. It belonged to them and in a sense they belonged to it. To lose part of the farm wasn't just to exchange land for cash but it was a loss of part of yourself there was such a great identity with "the land".

Why would this boy make such a request?

Why would he be willing to inflict this kind of family pain?

Why this act of rebellion?

It isn't hard to understand really? The boy wants what the father has. He is seeking to find self-fulfillment through the benefits of his father. He wants his father's stuff but not the father.

At the heart of his choice is what Augustine called "disordered love". In his Confession Augustine writes: A man has murdered another man—what was his motive? Either he desired his wife or his property or else he would steal to support himself; or else he was afraid of losing something to him; or else, having been injured, he was burning to be revenged." He goes on to say that even a murderer murders because he loves something. He loves romance or wealth or his reputation or something else too much.

In this story Jesus is telling, the younger brother loves and looks to things to give him the joy and meaning that only the Lord can give. The younger son may have lived with his father and may have even obeyed his father, but he didn't love his father. The thing he loved, ultimately was his father's things, not his father. His heart was set on the wealth, and the comfort, freedom and status that wealth brings. So he demands what will be his when his dad is dead.

While this younger son's bold demand would be expected to earn not his inheritance but full disinheritance as response to this rudeness. Jesus has the Father agree to divide his wealth between his sons. Jewish custom would be that the eldest son would get twice the share of his siblings and since there were only two boys the older son would get two thirds and the younger son one third of the estate.

Now in the audience that day, everyone hearing this story saw dad as either foolish or weak. But knowing the whole story we can see that the father's choice to allow free will is to leave the door opened for possible restoration of a relationship with this rebellious son. The father was willing to suffer for the sin of the child so that someday reconciliation would be possible.

This familiar story is tragic. With his newfound wealth in his hand the younger son travels to a distant land. He buys what he wants, does

whatever he likes, denies himself nothing and runs through all his money in out of control living.

We get the younger son's sin. It makes sense to us. It resonates with everything we know sin to be. He's done all these bad behaviors. All those kinds of things even society thinks of as sin. The kinds of things on which we levy what is called a "sin tax." We are clear bad acts, bad choices, are sin.

But sin is deeper than bad choices, bad acts, hurtful behavior.

George Knight, in his book *I Used to be Perfect*, reminds us of how Satan brought about the fall .

Satan's first point of attack was to get Eve to question the Word of God.

"Did God really say you must not eat any of the fruit in the garden?"

Second he gets her to doubt that God means what He says:

"You won't die, You certainly don't believe that do you?"

Third he gets her to doubt God's good intentions toward her.

God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God. He's keeping you from something good. He doesn't really want you to be happy."

And when she moved down the path through these three deceptions she become infected with the essence, the DNA of SIN

—God can't be trusted.

Here is the essence of sin. Before I disobey a commandment, or ignore some God directive I make those choices only because I've been infected with SIN I love me rather than God I believe God can't be trusted so I make self-directed, self-love decisions.

And what is the result? What was the immediate result for Adam and Eve? They felt naked. There's that inescapable guilt and we want to get un-naked.

The younger son in Jesus' story tried to cover his nakedness with wild abandoned living. The next thing sin does is it makes us want to get away from God—Adam and Eve hid in the garden and in our story the younger son runs away from home and the presence of the father.

And we get this younger brother's sin. He thought he deserved the benefits of the father, he loved the benefits, so he demands them and runs far from home.

A famine hits the land. He can't get work, he can't get food, and finally lands a job feeding hogs. He's so hungry he tries eating the pods he was feeding the pigs. Finally he came to his senses. He makes a plan.

He says to himself, "I'll return to my father and admit I was wrong and tell him I know I've forfeited the right to be his son. And I'll ask him to let me be one of his hired hands."

He had disgraced the family. He was now an outcast to the whole community. Later in the story the Father will remind us that at this point the son was "dead" to him. In that culture when such a great offense had occurred you didn't just apologize and move on, the rabbis taught there was restitution to be paid. That's what the son's plan is. He will be not a slave but a hired hand. A tradesman of some kind so he can earn a wage and begin to pay off his debt.

After getting his plan and his speech all prepared this younger son heads home.

The Father sees him while he's still a long ways off and he breaks all the rules of patriarchal decorum, he runs! Children ran, slaves ran but not the patriarch. But in this story it is from a heart of compassion and love that he runs to his son.

And the son starts to try and tell him his plan for making restitution. And the father won't listen. He's hugging him and calling the

servants to get the best robe, a ring for his finger, (that was like a new family debit card it was how they signed deals with the family ring) new shoes for his feet.

Listen to how Timothy Keller writes it: The father is saying, "I'm not going to wait until you've paid off your debt; I'm not going to wait until you've duly groveled. You are not going to earn your way back into the family, I'm going to simply take you back. I will cover your nakedness, poverty, and rags with robes of my office and honor."

In the story they kill the fatted calf, throw a party for the whole community, there is dancing and singing, and laughter and food and more food. The Father throws the party because the lost has been found.

Now in the stories of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin they end with the celebratory party, but not this parable.

There is a character in our drama that must be included for the story to bring its point home.

There is the older brother. All the time his little brother has been out blowing his inheritance the older brother has been home faithfully fulfilling duties.

So when the older brother comes in from the fields he sees light in the widows of the home place. He hears music, and laughter and knows there is dancing and food, and he can't figure out what's going on so he asks a young servant, who tells him, "Your brother is back and your father has killed the calf we were fattening and has prepared a great feast. We are celebrating because of his safe return.

But the older brother won't go into the feast. The father has thrown a feast and the older brother won't come in. And this is a slap in the face to the patriarch, the Father. In front of the whole community the son won't participate in the party.

The older son is mad. Mad at the expense, mad at the Father's forgiveness, mad at the celebration, mad at the unfairness.

He tells his Dad, "All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to (I've played by the rules). And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the finest calf we have."

This older son is disrespectful. He insults the father. The father had every right to disown this son for his disrespect. But he is the tender father. I love Keller's interpretation where he has the father say these words.:

"My son, despite how you've insulted me publicly, I still want you in the feast. I am not going to disown your brother, but I don't want to disown you, either. I challenge you to swallow your pride and come into the feast. The choice is yours. Will you or will you not?"

That question still hangs in the air.

I like to imagine the day before the younger son returned how would people have thought of the two sons? There's the bad boy and the good boy. I can imagine a group of women standing around the village well talking about how they feel sorry for the boy's mother. One of her boy's turned out so badly and the other was so good. From watching the day to day lives in the home and even from a distance—model son and the rebel. There must have been a self-satisfaction in the life of the older brother that was amazing. Pleased with himself. Sure he was on the right track. Sure it won't be that long before Dad dies and it's all mine...after all I've earned it, I deserve it!

Our story makes it clear as Keller writes, that we "can rebel against God and be alienated from him either by breaking his rules or by keeping all of them diligently.

Sin is a bigger problem than just doing bad stuff. Sin is putting yourself in the place of God as Savior, Lord, and Judge just as each

son in the story wanted to displace the authority of the father in their own life.

Jesus in this story at first seems to be affirming the world's system of dividing everyone into either moral "good guys" or immoral "bad guys." But one of the subtle sticks of dynamite in this parable is Jesus' revelation that EVERYONE is dedicated to a project of self-salvation. We all want our own way.

The Bible makes it so clear it's hard to know how we miss it. Psalm 53:3 Everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.

So let's get honest. What holds the controlling position in our heart? Who has our heart, our love, our passion other than God? Whatever it is is our God. It may be living as I please convinced that only I can decide what is right and wrong, I'll do my own thing. Or it can be putting my confidence in my level of conformity to the rules, standards, laws.

What Jesus teaches us in this story is that God can be trusted. Whether we are irreligious, free-wheeling, "younger brother" types or moral, conforming, religious "elder brother" types lost is lost. We can be lost far from home or sitting in the church if our love is misplaced on God's benefits and blessings rather than God himself.

But when we come to our senses, in the pig pen or in our Bible class we can know that the Father's heart for his two sons is God's heart toward us.

When Jesus came to this fallen world he did not come to condemn it but to save it. He didn't come in judgment but came to bear our judgment. The chastisement of our peace was upon him. By his stripes we are healed.

Jesus went to the cross in weakness, laid down his life, so that when we come to our senses there is forgiveness and reconciliation.

No matter what we've loved more than God we can come to love him for who he is not what he can do for us. We can love him because he first loved us.

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! I John 3:1

There is nothing more beautiful in all of reality than the picture of a perfectly happy Being, leaving all the bliss of heaven, and sacrificing, not just land or reputation in the community, but sacrificing everything for the sake of rebellious, undeserving, ungrateful people. The more you look at Jesus doing that, the more you will love him above any benefit, above anyone, or anything else. He wants to capture your heart so that nothing, absolutely NOTHING matters more than he does.

John Newton, the one who wrote Amazing Grace also penned these words

Our pleasure and our duty,
Though opposite before,
Since we have seen His beauty,
Are joined to part no more:
It is our highest pleasure,
No less than duty's call,
To love Him beyond measure,
And serve Him with our all.