



Thoughts on the Journey...

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In this week's gospel from Luke, Jesus is gathered with tax collectors and sinners, when the Pharisees and scribes begin to complain that Jesus was associating with *those kind of people*. He addresses their criticism with 3 parables: the shepherd who searches for one missing sheep, the woman who searches for one missing coin, and the father who waits for his prodigal son to come home. For the sake of this reflection, we will focus on the parable of the Prodigal Son.

There are three principal characters in Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son: the younger son who leaves and squanders his inheritance then returns to his father broken and empty; the elder son who has been loyal and obedient to his father all of his life but resents his father's unconditional love for his younger brother; and the Father who loves them both deeply. Each character plays an intrinsic role in Jesus' effort to help us understand where we are and who we ultimately should work to imitate in order to deepen our relationship with God. Unconditional love is at the root of this story just as it should be at the root of who we are and what we do.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word *prodigal* this way: 1. *spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant*; 2. *Having or giving something on a lavish scale*.

Whenever I have thought of the word 'prodigal' in relation to this parable, I have always associated it with the son who squandered his inheritance and then returned home. But ironically, the definition applies to both the son and the father: the son taking and the father giving. Culturally, the son's actions were equivalent to wishing his father was dead. However, the father did not disown him, instead,

“While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.”

The concept of unconditional love is difficult for us humans. We think more like the older son in the story who sees his father's unconditional love as recklessly extravagant, lavishly abundant... **PRODIGAL.**

Deep down, we know the sinfulness we are capable of and it is a stretch for us to really believe the idea that we are loved unconditionally by God: a God who is waiting to run to us with open compassionate arms. We mouth it, we say it all the time, but it is much easier for people to believe that God is a punishing, angry God rather than a God who welcomes us home regardless of where we have been, what we have done, or what we've lost. Being *at home* is that very place at the very center of our being where we can hear the voice that says, “You are my beloved on whom my favor rests”. BUT, we struggle with the idea that we are God's Beloved and that being God's beloved is enough. As a result of that, we are continually leaving home and setting out, as Luke says “for a distant country” thinking that there is something more *out there* rather than being content with our very accessible God who dwells *within us*.

For some, our conditional sense of God's love for us is at the heart of our faith struggle. One of the greatest challenges that we have, is not only RECEIVING God's love, but receiving God's forgiveness - believing that God can and will restore our full dignity. He will robe us in his grace, and prepare a feast for us in celebration.

By the world's standards, God's love is lavish, extravagant, and yes, prodigal! But our Father in heaven is calling us to embrace his abundant unconditional love so that we may find the peace that comes in knowing that God alone is enough. When we fully accept that, we can then change our prodigal living into prodigal loving.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is the embodiment of not only WHERE we are as individuals, but WHERE God is calling us to be. It is a parable that encapsulates the core message of the Gospel. It is a parable that takes us to the heart of our relationship with God. It is an inspiring parable with which to retreat into spiritual introspection about where we are on our own journey of faith (not only as individuals, but as a community) and where we are going in the future. It is a wonderful truth about God's generous love that captures the many ways that we can leave home...our journey back... and the boundless, lavish, prodigal love of a Father who eagerly waits to run to us.