



Sermon

Fr. Jeff Wylie

Rector, Christ's Church, Greensburg, Pennsylvania

March 31, 2019

When I started reconsidering my professional life and what I was doing, I realized I would be restless in anything other than ministry. I tried the "easy way" by becoming a Hospice Chaplain. Not that it was easy work; instead, it required no tests, no hoops to jump through, just go out and do the job. However, God still was saying, "close, but not quite." The reality is that I had mixed emotions of returning to my original calling. I honestly felt like a prodigal son. When I left, I left thinking I will never go back. I quickly realized that as I ran, I could not run from myself.

However, all those missteps, all the time away, came with a price. I had my M.Div., but the credits had exceeded the ten-year, cut-off mark for being transferred. However, the yearning inside started me back on my journey again, and I was met by God's love and embrace. I would love to go on and tell you about how we are the

prodigal son: you know, sinners and tax collectors. However, there were two sons and both needed repentance. Both sons are our story, not just the one who left. As we squirm a bit in our seat, let us first recap briefly this parable, which by the way is the longest parable in the bible.

Too often we side exclusively with the underdog or in this instance the younger son who left. I bet most of us has a story about learning what God had called us to do and then coming back to that call later. Likewise, we tend to vilify the older son. We tend to make him out to be the real bad guy in this story. When we do so, we lose an essential part of who we are as well.

WHAT?

A good friend of mine loves to ask me questions about God. He is classic in asking how God allows or tolerates sin, pain, and death. He had a very broken relationship with his father and to say they did not meet the eye-to-eye, is an understatement. His experience of his dad leads him to believe his father was a very evil man. When I told him that his dad could be in heaven this very day, he shuddered. The anger and heartache was so intense for him he could not even imagine thinking that one day he might see his father in heaven. I assured him that if his father is in heaven, he has been perfected and the sinful nature is gone. He is a person restored and a person whom you may not have seen. My friend's response taught me something fundamental: sometimes

we are the older son. Today, let us unfold the position of the older son.

First, the younger son asked and received his inheritance from his father. Though this may be a little odd for us today, it was scandalous in the day. Never was property divided before a father died. The younger son was telling his father, “Dad, I wish you were dead.” Can you imagine the older brother seeing his younger brother acting so disrespectfully? No doubt he was further upset when his father consented to his brother’s demand.

Then the younger brother moved to a distant land. He left the family. He alienated himself. Not only did the younger brother say goodbye to the father, but he also said goodbye to the whole family, including his older brother.

We see how low the younger son fell when he was eating with pigs. Remember, there’s a reason we don’t serve our Jewish friends pulled pork or bacon. We see that the younger son was working for Gentiles and with pigs. Coming to his senses did not indicate remorse or repentance. It is left unknown if he was trying to manipulate the father or truly repentant. The older son perceived the younger son of manipulation, to come back and cause more havoc on the family.

The father's view is that his son who was lost is now found. The father's reactions were unprecedented. He ran to his son and then hugged him; both responses were

considered undignified for a man of his stature. Where is his anger, where is the family justice? Not only that, but the father offered the fatted calf for the celebration. The older son wanted to enjoy that special treat but was now denied. You can almost hear the brother thinking, “Why don’t you give him a pork sandwich, too?”

Note that the father left the celebration to invite the eldest son to join the party; again, an attempt for harmony in the father's house. This time the eldest son has left, at least psychologically. We see the interplay with between the eldest son and the father. Finally, the story ends open-ended. We don't know what happened to this family. This is significant for us as well.

We must also go beyond the obvious symbolism that the youngest son represented sinners and tax collectors and the eldest son represented the Pharisees. We need to dig deeper.

We need to look into ourselves. We know how hard is it to reconcile because we all have been deeply hurt by others. Working with prisoners, I see how amazing their transformation is to a “new creation” as Paul describes us, how we celebrate them coming to Christ. However, their victims still shudder at the reality that these individuals can go to heaven. It is all too easy to be like the elder brother. Repentance is for him as well. It is easy to get angry at God's love and generosity. It is easy for us to be cynical and jaded by the past hurts and experiences we have to those who have wronged us.

No matter the pain, the hurt, and personal collateral, we are all called to love, not judge. We have to know and trust that when God calls a person to heaven, they are perfected without the ability to harm anymore. We must believe in the Lord and love those who hurt us no matter the price, even to ourselves. If we are struggling today with others, let us return to the Lord and celebrate with Him the reunion of those who were once lost, but are now found. Amen.

Fr. Jeff +