

“Departures and Returns”, based on Luke 15:1-3, 11b.-32

David Jahnke, 3/14/10

I think there are about ten sermons in the parable of the prodigal son...But the heart of it this narrative is really the heart of the gospel: 1. straying from our heavenly father (which we all do), 2. realizing we are lost, 3. turning back, and 4. finding out our Father was always ready to welcome us home with a great celebration. 5. And finally, we cannot forget the faithful older brother and son...who represents the grumbling Pharisees and scribes; and probably most of us, at least from time to time as we wonder why so much attention paid to those who seem to be squandering their lives.

There is a great 1970s mini-series called Jesus of Nazareth and the scene with this parable is one of the most poignant. Jesus is on his way to the tax collector Levi's house. And the disciples tell Jesus the rumors that are spreading about him; that he spends so much time eating and drinking with sinners. When they arrive at Levi's house, we see harlots and drunkards; we hear music and see dancing and drinking; all representing the wild living that the prodigal son joined.

With the disciples at the door, afraid to enter into the house of a tax-collecting sinner, Jesus gathers all the young hedonists around him to hear the gospel.

After a smile and a brief silence, he speaks of a young man who boldly stands up to his father and demands his inheritance. The young man then leaves his home for a far country in order to live it up. The party-goers have been drawn them in by news of standing up to authority, sudden wealth and rebellious living. Jesus then says, “After some time, all of the inheritance was squandered. A famine spread and the young man found himself hungry and desperate. So he went to work on a pig farm.” What a turn of events. We can get by for a while living it up when times are good. But when times turn sour... “friends” can go sour as well; when times turn dry, resources, including human ones, often dry up.

The parable speaks of an inheritance of property. But this also represents a spiritual inheritance—the Kingdom of God. The Prodigal Son has been raised in righteousness by his Father and he throws it all away and ends up empty and hungry, unclean and alone. I wonder if you worry, as I do, about our children or grand-children losing the incredible inheritance which has been passed down from generation to generation.

You may have heard this already. But last summer, a friend told me of the long history of faithful elders and pastors in his family tree. And how he feared that was all coming to an end with his daughters who were disinterested in religion.

I had a young man come to me this week and speak about how he and his girlfriend had been clean for 9 months after wasting five years hooked on heroin. And if our young people escape the drugs and alcohol; the promiscuity and pornography; then what lies ahead? For far too many, materialism and individualism; production and consumption; a life devoid of both God and true community.

The young man in the parable bottomed out while working in the filth of a Gentile pig farm. Jesus says, “When he came to himself he said, '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..."”

Because the Son has been raised in righteousness and remembers his Father's love and the abundance of his home, he was able to turn and start the journey back home. That has happened for many of us raised with love and in faith and will happen for many more who have strayed from the church. But what about those who do not have such a foundation of knowledge and faith?

I watched a great Japanese movie this week called “Departures.” A father and son were on a rocky beach. The Father taught his son that before there was language, our ancestors would give each other stones to describe how they were feeling. He and his Father then exchanged rocks with each other and the son always kept this rock in his cello case— an instrument that his father made him play at a young age. (Something which I can relate to...) Shortly thereafter, his father abandoned him and his mother.

The young man eventually became a professional musician in Tokyo but could not make a living. So he went back to his hometown in the countryside where his mother had left him some property. He got into work as an undertaker-- unclean work in Japan. After struggling through the adjustment of working with dead bodies, he came to see the profound beauty in the work of preparing bodies for burial. And also the profound importance and meaning of this work to families who had lost loved ones. This, by the way, is a warning about strict, traditional stereotypes of clean and unclean. But that’s another sermon...

After a postcard came to his mother’s house that his father had died-- the first contact about him in 30 years-- he had to decide whether to go see his father again. When he arrives for the ritual cleansing, the undertakers show up and start to rush through the process of taking the body away. The son jumps in and prepares the body himself. While doing this, he cannot quite get his father’s hand to shut rightly. And as he works with it, a rock falls out of his Father’s hand— the rock that he had given his Father all those years before...

There are many in the far country due largely to circumstances beyond their control. The failures of parents; the uncertainties of economies; the betrayal of friends or spouses. All of these can lead to a sense that our heavenly Father has abandoned us or perhaps that God is dead.

While the analogy is imperfect, I know that God wants to communicate as the Father did. God has always loved us. He has always held us in his hand. And because of God's death and rising, we can look forward to one day knowing this truth in ways that even the most deeply spiritual person can hardly imagine.

But I also see the older son in this movie. At first the son was not ready to forgive his Father, understandably. The pain was too great. But had he not gone to see him, he would never have received the communication of from beyond the grave that his father had always loved him.

As we turn back from far-country living, we have to turn to loved ones and friends and brothers and sisters in Christ who have hurt us; we have to let the past go and rise up to God and embrace the present. We have to let go of who was right and who was faithful and who deserves what and all join the celebration of a family united once again.

Joining the party was of course what got Jesus into trouble with the elder sons in the first place. I got to thinking about how it would go down if I started spending as much time at the bar as at the office. It would largely depend on my behavior therein. While Jesus ate and drank with sinners, he also taught and healed. While he enjoyed music and probably even the dancing (Did you notice there was dancing in the parable?); Jesus never excused or condoned sin, much less participated in it. You see our God entered the far country of our flesh and bone; even the far country of our sin and death not to condone them but to bear with us and do away with sin; and in so doing, to draw us near that we might be saved and healed.

So as the body of Christ, we are called to pay as much attention to the prodigal sons and daughters around us as to ourselves. In a sense we do this already through our daily encounters in a growingly secular world. But how much is Christ working through us to draw people back home to God?

And how exuberant is our welcome; how joyful our celebration every time they and we return home. For every day is a reminder to me— and surely to most of you— that we are all still prodigal sons and daughters. And I very much need the weekly return home for a reminder of the amazing love and mercy of God; for joyful music and even a little dancing; for a feast prepared by our heavenly father and hosted by our elder brother. To the God of all grace who calls us to eternal union with Christ be all the glory and the power, now and forevermore. Amen