

“Coming Home Hungry”

March 18, 2007

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:11-32

I want to start this morning by asking how familiar the parable I just read is to you. How many of you feel as if you already “know” this story, the parable that’s most often called “The Prodigal Son”? Of those of you who know it, how many of you identify with at least one of the three main characters in it – the younger son, the elder son, or the father? Who identifies most closely with the younger son? The father? What about the elder son ... does anyone identify with him and his pain and anger? Why? Does it have to do with whether you’re an elder or a younger sibling or whether you feel as though you were treated unfairly by a parent?

I’m asking these questions in order to invite all of us to be aware of the inevitability that *our* stories – the narratives of our own lives – will affect what we hear in *other* stories. And I also want us to be aware that that’s the *power* of Jesus’ parables – there’s enough room in the characters and events for each of us to find bits of ourselves in them and there’s *also* enough room in them to find different parts of ourselves in them at different times in our lives.

So, this morning, I offer some of what I find in this parable that might have echoes for us – for you and me and this congregation – at this time in our lives.

Let’s start, reasonably enough, at the beginning of the parable and the younger son. For some reason, unknown to us and perhaps even unknown to him, this son tells his father – he *tells* him, he doesn’t *ask* him – to hand over the inheritance that will be his when his father dies. As Jesus tells the parable, the father does exactly what his younger son has asked, dividing his property between his two sons. The younger son then sets out for a distant country, where, in the words of this translation, “he squandered his property in dissolute living.”

This is all pretty familiar, isn’t it? As one of the most famous of the parables attributed to Jesus, this story has an opening that doesn’t hold any surprises.

But let’s take a closer look. In 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea, to a gathering of Jews who took the law and the prophets very seriously, Jesus’ opening line could hardly have described more offensive behavior in a son. By coldly demanding his inheritance while his father is still alive, the younger son is violating the Fifth Commandment, “Honor your father and your mother.” So the opening line is an attention-grabbing shocker, and Jesus then follows it with *another* surprise: the father complies with his younger son’s demand, without a single protest or even a word of caution.

Given this nearly-inexplicable opening, this parable’s original audience might not have been surprised by what came next. After the younger son succeeds in getting his inheritance early and leaving his family far behind, he loses his property through what our text this morning calls “dissolute living.” Jesus doesn’t spell out just what was so “dissolute” in how the younger son used and then lost his inheritance, but, later in the parable, the older son accuses his brother of having wasted the money on prostitutes.

This is the place in the parable I want us to explore first. This is the place I want us to stay for a while, not because it has great tabloid potential with its inferences of illicit sex and living on the wild side. This parable is *not* a 1<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of a morality

play in which money, sex, and fast living lead to ruin. No, there's something much deeper and much more challenging here.

Focusing on the possibility that the younger son loses his property and his dignity because of sexual immorality is what many preachers have done over the centuries. But I think that's too easy. It gets us off the hook too quickly, because, as long as we tell ourselves that we lead upright, morally sound lives, we think we can duck this parable's deeper message about how the younger son reached the point of being lost, hungry, and far from home. And the deeper message I don't want us to duck this morning is all wrapped up in a single word: "dissolute," as in, "he squandered his property in dissolute living."

The word comes from a Latin word that does not deal with sex. "Dissolute" comes from the word "*disolvere*," which means "to loosen, to untie, to dissolve." This is where the younger son goes astray – not in sexual (mis)conduct, but in thinking that it's possible to have a life worth living that's dissolved, loosed, untied from family, from connection, from the very source of life and love. As painful and destructive as unloving, unfaithful, and addictive sexual behavior can be, this parable points to a deeper wounding of our souls and to our very being: the wounding that comes when we dissolve the connections that give us our life, the connections that nurture our life. This parable points to the wounding that comes when we try to dissolve and ignore our connections with God and all of God's creation -- past, present, and future. When those connections are the casualties of our dissolute living, we will at some point find ourselves, whether it's today or tomorrow or on our deathbeds, empty, hungry, lost, and longing for home.

Even though this parable was recorded nearly two thousand years ago, there's something especially American about the younger son. Like him, we think we can *and should* make it on our own. (Mexican-American author Richard Rodriguez has said that it's tragic that in the U.S. we raise our children so that they will move away. In Mexico, he says, parents raise their children hoping that they will stay.)

Like the younger brother, we think our lives belong solely to ourselves, so we aren't accountable for how we use our cultural, theological, and material inheritance. As a culture, we are intoxicated with the idea of autonomy, the idea that we can always make ourselves anew by moving, buying a new car, buying a new face (or some other body part). We are enthralled by our power to transform the deserts of the Southwest into a lush paradise with swimming pools and green lawns everywhere. We fight tooth and nail against government regulation that will eat into our profits by limiting what we can do with "our" land, even if what we're doing will harm the land and our neighbors and even though the land is God's, not ours.

But, of course, there's something more broadly human, and not just American, about the younger son. Despite what we can know and experience of the healing, nurturing power of connection and community, we human folk often want to break free of those connections, dissolve the bonds of family and tradition, and prove that we can make it on our own. Sometimes, in a broken world filled with wounded people, we do have to break free of connections and ties that diminish us, that drain instead of nurturing us. But at least as often, and I think more often, the connections we try to dissolve are the bonds that hold us in the larger human family and in God's cosmos.

Being in relationship, being in community, allowing ourselves to recognize that our life is a gift, not a possession to use or misuse ... this is all hard work. It's much easier to pretend I can live my life any old way I want to, without having to bump up against the people that my actions affect. *Much* easier. So the reality of the hard work of

living in connection must have been behind the elder son's reaction when the prodigal son came home hungry. "Listen!" he said to his father. I've been doing the hard work of being in community, tending to land and to family. Why should that goof-off of a younger brother get a party? What about me?

In that moment, the elder son reveals himself to have been living in his own state of dissolution. Despite the fact that he stayed at home, he, too, had squandered much of his life in dissolute living. He had failed to see, celebrate, and participate in the fullness of his life. Instead, he seems to have cut off his tie with his wandering brother and to have dissolved his true bond with his father. Instead of living in connection with his family, he seems to have concentrated on trying to earn what was *already his* as a gift from a gracious, loving father.

The parable invites us to see ourselves in both the younger and the elder brother, and it invites us to see the extravagant welcome of God's love in the father. Through the brothers, the parable suggests that when we seek to dissolve the bonds that give us life –the bonds that connect us to God, to the human community, and to all of creation – we are dissolving ourselves. Whether we are the wandering, autonomous, and eventually wastrel type or we're the settled, obedient, and eventually resentful type, we are in danger of ignoring and destroying our connections with God and with one another, and we are in danger of dissolving the possibilities of growing into the blessed, beloved people God called into being on the day of our birth.

Whether we live our lives close to home or in far away lands, we can lose our way. We can cut ourselves off from our connection to God and to one another. We can deny our communal nature and close our hearts to one another and, ultimately, ourselves. This morning's parable invites us to join the younger son and come to ourselves. We're invited to come to ourselves and discover the depth of our hunger for our home in God. And in this parable, in his teachings, and in his life and resurrection, Jesus teaches over and over again, that no matter how far we have wandered from our true, sacred home, God is longing to welcome us home.

Whatever the damage, the shame, the pain, the betrayal, the waste, the depth of our "lostness," Jesus reminds us that it's never too late. There is always our Holy Source, the One who has given us the things that we have lost, destroyed, neglected, or repudiated. There is always the Holy One who grieves over the choices that lead us far away and dissolve our sense of connection with God and with one another. There is always the Holy, Blessed God of life, who longs for our return, who knows that, if we return, we will be deeply hungry, and who stands ready to welcome us home with loving arms and with all the food we truly need.

Whatever your hunger, whatever bonds you think you have dissolved between yourself and your family and friends or between yourself and your God, bring your hunger home, so that God can feed you in joy and in grace.

Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor  
First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC