

## Sermon Notes, March 6, 2016

### The Prodigal Sons, Luke 15:11-32

Robert Fulghum is a former minister who was a best-selling author. You might have read his book, *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. His premise was that everything that was essential in life—the most important lessons he really ever needed to learn—he learned in kindergarten or at the sandbox at Sunday School.

This morning we begin a series on the Prodigal Son, or what might be more aptly called the Prodigal Sons or the parable of the Two Sons. Arguably it is the greatest short story ever written or told. When you read this story, and you see the behavior of these two sons, the younger as well as the older, you realize that some of the most important and powerful and profound lessons learned in life are really not, and never will be, learned in kindergarten. They are learned the hard way on the journey of life, if you will, by the painful and difficult choices and the pain that we must experience.

For centuries it has been called the parable of the prodigal son—*the* son—but it's a great mistake to think this is a story about one son. It's a story of two sons. You are meant to compare and contrast them. If you don't compare and contrast them the way Jesus wants you to, you're going to miss the radical message of this parable, and it is radical.

Jesus is saying here that every thought the human race has ever had about how to connect to God, whether East or West, whether in the ancient, modern, or post-modern era, in every religion, in all secular thought, has been wrong. Every human idea of how to connect with God is wrong. Jesus is here to shatter all existing human categories.

This morning we're going to begin to look at the experience and the lessons of the younger son, the rebellious one, and look at that road to rebellion and then the road back to acceptance, forgiveness, to rebirth and new life.

In this parable we will be able to see ourselves in all three of the characters. And that's the point.

James Thurber, the cartoonist and satirist said, "*Every man before he dies must discover what he's running from, what he's running to, and why.*" That's what this story is about, and it's what your story and my story are about.

The obvious question as we read this story and as we study it is where am I on this road?

This morning we're going to begin to take a look at this son's rebellion and what brought him back.

1. The first sign that gives evidence of the son's heart and his rebellion is A DEATH WISH. (vv. 11-12).

Kenneth Bailey, who is a New Testament scholar, grew up in the Middle East, the son of missionary parents, lived in Jerusalem for a number of years, knows the culture of the Middle East extremely well. He has presented this story everywhere from the Middle East to India and he's asked them about this opening scene, where the young son comes to the Father and says, "*I want what is rightfully due to me.*" He's asked them what that means, what the significance is and he said almost without exception,

- a) First of all, they are stunned because nothing like this would ever happen,
- b) And secondly, they all say the same thing, it is a death wish.

When the original hearers heard this, they would have been absolutely astounded. Bailey, knowing the history and culture of the time, said that to ask for the inheritance while the father was still alive was to wish him dead—to wish the father dead. Unheard of! Bailey also says a traditional Middle Eastern father could only respond in one way. He would be expected to drive the boy out of the house with verbal if not physical and violent blows, but this father doesn't do that.

Now, in doing what he did, of course, the younger son is rejecting everything his father stands for—his values, his ethics, his discipline, his love, his faith, his life...

But, there's something more even more unheard of and it's in the second half of verse 12, because if the original hearers were amazed at the speech in verse 12a, they were absolutely astonished by what the father did in verse 12b. It says, "So he divided his property between them."

The translation uses the word property, but the Greek word used here is *bios*, from which we get our word biology. It really says, "The father divided his *life* between them." This son is asking his

father to tear his life apart, to tear apart his standing in the community, to tear himself apart. That is what the father does! This father is enduring the worst thing a human being can endure...rejected love.

Where do we fit in? This is dramatic step in this journey of rebellion. But I really think that the first step away from God is the wish to be free. It is to be out from under His authority. It is to cut the ties. We begin to cut the ties little by little—in defiance—in disobedience—in rebellion. The first step in rebellion doesn't have to be this dramatic. In fact, most of the time it isn't this dramatic. It's just little by little in disobedience by thought and then by action.

Henri Nouwen in his wonderful book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, writes this: “The son’s ‘leaving’ is, therefore, a much more offensive act than it seems at first reading. It is the heartless rejection of the home in which the son was born and nurtured and a break with the most precious tradition carefully upheld by the larger community of which he was a part... it is a betrayal of the treasured values of family and community.”

It speaks to me in this way as well. I can easily put myself in the place of the younger son. In doing so, I know that it's a false freedom that he wants. It's the first lesson taught in Scripture in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve, the moment they tried to exert their independence from God was the moment they lost their freedom!

The truth is that no child of God wishes the Father dead without killing him or herself in the process. But the amazing part of this story, as we'll talk about in the next few weeks, is that the Father lets him go.

I want to return again to Henri Nouwen's book on the parable of the prodigal son. He does a wonderful job of explaining what is actually happening to the Prodigal Son, where he's going, and where he's trying to run from. He says: “*Home is the center of my being where I can hear the voice that says, ‘You are my Beloved in whom I am well pleased.’*”

Jesus made it clear that the same voice that He heard in the Jordan River and on Mount Tabor can be heard by me. He makes it clear that there is a home with the Father. But if I decide to keep control, if I go out into the world, I will keep running around asking everything, ‘Do you really love me? Do you really love me?’ I give all the power to the voices of the world. It is the world that defines me then. The world's love is full of ifs...endless ifs and it is not too hard to know when I have left home spiritually. But when I am home with the Father then I know I am the beloved.

Do you see? If you try to get away from God to get control of your life, you will give total control of your life to something else. That's why he was out of control. “I've left home.” As a result, those things you have gone to instead of God because you want to have control of your life, you've ceded control to them, and worry is the way it controls you, or bitterness is the way these things control you.

Repentance is the way home. And repentance is not just to look at the violations, but to look underneath to see why I'm doing what I'm doing. It's not till he comes to his senses that he's on his way back to his father.

The things you reflexively turn to other than God are not home. They are not home. They are voices that say, “I'll love you if,” and at some point, a famine will come along and you won't be able to fulfill the if.

If you're a prodigal, come home. Look at Jesus. Jesus was stripped naked for us so we could be clothed in God's love. He got the rejection we deserved so we get the welcome of God. Even before we repent, God is on us, robing us, kissing us, and feasting us.

Come home now. Come to the Table. Come to the Father's feast. He prepared it for you.