

The Waiting Father

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Luke 15:11-24

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' " ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." ²²But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

1. A Missionary Waits

Have you ever been waiting before? I am sure you have. Do you enjoy waiting or does waiting make you frustrated? While I was in Russia one of the Russian missionaries told us that after he got a sense of call to be a missionary, he had to wait for ten years. After he had a sense of the call, he changed his major in college, served in the Korean army, and went to seminary. It took ten years for him to be ready to be sent. When he arrived in Moscow, he complained to God about why it took so long for him to come to Russia. God told him that it took 74 years for the Lord to open Russia to welcome missionaries. He meant that it took 74 years for the communist government of Russia to end and welcome missionaries. For 74 years, God was preparing Russia to accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. The Waiting Father

Today's scripture is called "The parable of the prodigal son." Many preachers focus on the son. But I would like to focus on the father. So I would like to call this parable "The parable of the waiting father." Let me tell you briefly the story of this parable. A certain man had two sons. One day, the younger son said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the inheritance." Then the father divided his property between his two sons. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and left for a foreign country. There he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all throughout that country. Soon, he had nothing to eat. He went to work for a man in that country, and the man sent him out to feed his pigs. He was so hungry that he would have eaten what the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. That brought him to his senses. He said, "My father's workers have plenty to eat, and here I am, starving to death! I will get up and go to my father. I'll say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.' "

So he got up and went to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him, ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son ever again." But his father said to his servants, "Hurry and bring the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals for his feet! Get the best calf and prepare it. We must celebrate with feasting. This son of mine was dead, but has come back to life! He was lost and has now been found!"

What a beautiful story this parable is. The younger son did not expect such a warm welcome from his father. He was full of joy and peace at home.

3. The Painting from Rembrandt

Last week I showed a painting from the Dutch artist Rembrandt called "The sacrifice of Isaac." This morning, I am going to show another well-known painting, "The return of the prodigal son." I saw these two original paintings in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Of course, the main figures in this painting are the prodigal son and his father. Look at the father. His back stoops and his eyes are almost closed indicating that he is almost blind. His face captures the joy of the returning son. He is in a red cloak, tenderly touching the shoulders of his son kneeling before him. It is interesting to notice that the two hands of the father are different. His right hand is softer and more receptive in gesture. On the other hand, his left hand appears larger and more masculine. Father's two hands show God's motherly and fatherly love. The father has a long beard indicating

that he had been waiting for his younger son for a long time without taking care of himself. Standing at the right is the prodigal's older brother, who crosses his hands in judgment. He seems to object to the father's compassion for his younger brother. The woman at top left, barely visible, is likely the mother. The seated man, whose dress implies wealth, may be the father's close friend.

Now let us look at the prodigal son. His outer clothes were probably sold for money, and his inner clothing is torn and filthy. His yellow-brown, torn undergarment just covers his exhausted, worn-out body from which all strength is gone. His sandal lies beside his feet, while the other barely hangs on by a strap. His head is shaved like that of a prisoner. His gaze is not up into the father's eyes. He just waits for his father's mercy in sorrow, shame, remorse, and anxiety.

4. The Response of the Older Son

The homecoming of the younger son should be a time of rejoicing for the family. But the older son hovers on the edge of the light that surrounds his father and his younger brother. His face shows feelings of puzzlement mixed with bitterness and contempt. According to the parable of the prodigal son, the older son complains against his father's forgiving love, saying that nothing has been given to him. Although he stays with his father, he has not had the joy of an intimate relationship with his father. He is spiritually a prodigal son who needs to come to the father to experience his father's unfailing love.

5. Who was Rembrandt?

Who was Rembrandt? He was born in 1606 and raised by pious parents who had firm religious convictions. He acquired a deep reverence for the Bible, and this had a profound influence on his spiritual development. In his paintings, he reveals an understanding of the spiritual and emotional qualities of life. Rembrandt married Saskia van Uylenburgh and had four children. But all of his children and his wife died before his death. His financial condition worsened. In 1656, he declared bankruptcy. And his reputation and popularity declined. Later he got in a relationship with a woman named Hendrickje, but she died in 1663. And his youngest son died in 1668, eleven months before his death at the age of 63. His life was full of bitterness, sorrow, and depression. It is very likely Rembrandt identified himself with the prodigal son who was in need of the father's embracing comfort and love.

6. Conclusion

On the wall of the Hermitage Museum opposite the painting of the parable of the prodigal son hangs another painting. That is "The sacrifice of

Isaac.” The two paintings stand in juxtaposition. These two tell us that Isaac is saved by the angel and the prodigal son is also saved by his father. Both sons tell us about a God who loves us and whom we are called to love and worship.

7. Application

The parable of the prodigal son and the painting from Rembrandt represent the spiritual homecoming of all of humankind. Home means a lot to us. Home is where we can feel warmth, safety and security. It is the place where we can rest, relax, enjoy time with loved ones. Home is our nest and where we feel most comfortable in the world. There is no place like home. On our way back to the U.S. from Russia, one of our team members said, the happiest moment for her was when she was on board a plane to be back home.

Wherever we go, we miss our home. But we need to remember that we have a spiritual home where we can meet our heavenly Father, the Creator of ourselves and the universe. I would like to show a music video clip, “Going home.”

Goin' home. Goin' home. I'm a-goin' home.
Quiet-like some still day, I'm just goin' home.
It's not far, just close by, through an open door.
Work all done, cares laid by, goin' to roam no more;
Mother's there 'xpecting me, father's waiting, too,
Lots of folks gathered there, all the friends I knew.

We are all spiritual prodigal sons and daughters who need God always. Our heavenly Father wants us to be in an intimate relationship with Him always. If we remember that we have a heavenly Father who is waiting for us, wherever we are, we can have joy and hope. Whenever you feel lonely, remember that we have a home to return where our heavenly Father is waiting.

The church is like our heavenly home. Thanks be to God who is waiting for us at our spiritual home and welcomes us always. Amen.