

March 31, 2019
Rev. Jane Florence
Text: Luke 15: 11-32
Title: Salvation Journey



We enter Luke's story as Jesus is telling parables. He tells stories- to teach. In a string of them, he tells this one. The youngest of two brothers asked for half of Dad's money which would be his inheritance, and then the young man ran off to another country. The text says he 'squandered his money in dissolute' living. Use your imagination there. When he ran out of money and was hungry, he got a job feeding pigs. He found himself starving, desiring even pig slop for himself, so he "came to his senses" and decided to go back home and ask to be dad's hired hand. Upon his return, his father was happy. In the part that we didn't read, his brother was not.

We hear in this a story about how the young man did wrong and the moral mistakes he makes in squandering his money in luxurious living. His brother says the young man wasted his inheritance on prostitutes. The father welcomes him home, no questions asked, no penalty, no scolding, just a huge embrace of joy and a welcome home party to celebrate.

This is a very nice story for us to hear because most of us can relate to it in some way. Some of us see ourselves in the younger brother. We are the one who has made some unwise choices in our journey. We are the one who realized we have made a huge mistake. We are the one who longs to be forgiven, and loved and welcomed home even though we don't believe we deserve it.

Some of us can relate to the older brother. We are the one who did what was expected of him. We are the one who was always responsible. We've seen our sibling make a fool out of himself and we gave thanks that we weren't that foolish. Some of us are the one who sees himself as just a little bit better than and the one who resents it when people don't get what they have coming to them when they mess up.

This is a very rich story, with very sound lessons. We moralize the good and bad and hear in it a message of grace. It's a good lesson to hear when we make mistakes by losing our way or resenting others. It's a story that teaches that we are loved. It tells us that grace prevails and forgiveness is granted for both sons. For each of us.

I was talking to a Christian educator. She was concerned about youth learning the Bible. We were talking about ways the students might explore the scriptures and curriculum that she might use. I offered letting the youth delve into scripture and discuss it from their perspectives. I could see her anxiety rising. She became very adamant at that point saying something to the effect, "if you let them just talk about it, you won't know if they get the RIGHT message from it!" I'm not sure which 'right' message she has in mind, but I might venture to guess by her great fear that what the youth think might be the message might not be the message she thinks is "right."

Richard Rohr talks about stages of faith development, or levels of spiritual consciousness.¹ The early levels are very dualistic. In that thinking there is just one right and all else is wrong- and the way these of early faith stages see things, they are the ones who are right and all the rest are wrong. As Rohr puts it, “HOW you see, is WHAT you see.” So for those who see dualistically, this is a story of moral failure of the first son, who wasted his money. That is particularly true for those seeped in Western thought who have been taught the value of money. In a capitalistic society, there’s not much greater sin or foolishness than losing all your money.

A study was done with this passage.² This same passage was read to people in the United States. A group of seminary students here were read the story and instructed to then tell it to the person seated next to them. Their tellings were recorded. The researchers then read it to students in St. Petersburg, Russia. People were asked to retell the story to the person next to them right after they had heard it. 84% of the Russians remembered a detail in verse 14 that only 6% of American’s remembered.

Hear verse 14 again: ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.”

This story is most often thought of as the Prodigal Son to us is heard as the story of the famine victim to them.

In 1941, the German army imposed a famine upon St Petersburg. It lasted 900 days, almost three years. During that time, 670,000 people – about one-fourth of the total population of St. Petersburg starved to death. People in St Petersburg remember the piles of bodies – the mass graves – the family members they watched starve. The Russian responders to this parable made little notice to the fact that the boy had dwindled his inheritance, when it was pointed out to them that the son had wasted all his money, they said, “so then he was poor like everyone else. A young man without money is not notable.” For them it is not a moral failure to be without money. It is just life. The boy did make a nearly fatal, really stupid mistake according to the Russians. He left his father’s house. His sin, according to their reading, was putting a price tag on the value of family, thinking that money was all he needed of them. His sin was self-sufficiency.

Both the Western and the Eastern did fault the young man, one sees he is immoral; one sees he is foolish. This researchers were all the more curious. How would other cultures hear this story? The same story was read to some seminary students in East Africa. They were asked the question “why does the young man end up starving in a pig pen?” The researcher was eager to hear if they would respond like the Westerners by saying the son had wasted his money, or if they would respond like the Easterners in saying because there was a famine. To his surprise, the researcher heard something all together different. 80% of the East Africans heard something neither the Americans or

¹ Richard Rohr. *The Naked Now*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

² Mark Allan Powell. *What Do They Hear?* Nashville: Abingdon.

the Russians heard. They heard verse 16; ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.”

According to the African students, the young man was not immoral (as Americans see it) or foolish (as Russians see him). To the Africans, he was a young man in a foreign country. The young man was an immigrant. They said that immigrants often lose their money. They don't know how things work in the new land. They don't know how to live in a strange country. So he made the mistake of spending all his money when he shouldn't have, but he got a job. He was working, doing his best. He was hired out in a job no one else really wanted. He was feeding the pigs. In his culture, pigs were unclean – in the religious, ritual 'impure' since. He had taken a position contrary to his upbringing. He was trying to fit into this foreign land when a famine came. The East African's identified the sin in the story not upon the immigrant, but upon the natives. A society that would let a stranger go hungry and not give him anything to eat – after the Bible commands us to care for the stranger and alien in our midst, after the social imperative of the Hebrew teaching is hospitality, is not a faithful people. The East African's identified the sin in the story as the society that would let an immigrant go hungry.

Jesus tells a story to teach a lesson. What was it? Don't waste your money? Don't waste your family? Don't neglect the immigrants? Or, did Jesus have another character in mind? Remember, the father? the one who runs with open arms to embrace and celebrate the one who was lost who now has come home. The parent who embraces the wayward son, is the same parent who embraces the foolish son, is the same parent who offers forgiveness to both and who teaches hospitality to strangers.

Our journey of salvation faith is about giving up our dualistic thinking that we have all the right answers- that the way we see things is the only right way- that there is only one right answer. Our journey of maturing is allowing that there are many ways, many paths, many understandings. Our salvation journey is to open ourselves and let go in order to grow. We journey on a path that leads us to new understandings, new acceptance, and greater love for all when we open our minds and listen to others on the journey. When we are willing to listen and let go of all our right answers, we are on the path of salvation learning that the Eternal Mystery of Divine Love welcomes us all in one embrace.

Forgiven and Beloved, May it be so.