

THE SON WHO STAYED AT HOME

Luke 15: 11-32

This is such a familiar story that we fail to capture its full meaning. All we tend to remember is the first part of the story and forget the ending. It is one story and not two, and they both have importance for our understanding of what it is that the parable means. We name it the “Parable of the Prodigal Son”, but we should name it the “Parable of the prodigal son and the son who stayed at home.”

We know the first part of the story so well. A son cuts himself off from his home and goes off into the world to try and find himself, only to find that he is not the person he thought he was. There is a familiar ring about that first move to get away from home. Leaving home and striking out for oneself in order to discover oneself is a very American story.

One of the great American novels, *The Great Gatsby* by Scott Fitzgerald, is about a young man, Joe Gatz, who leaves home and tries to create from his own imagination a new life for himself by cutting himself off from his past. Joe Gatz from the Mid-west makes himself “the great Gatsby” pretending an Oxford education, executive success and a yachtsman’s prowess. But reality catches up with the “Great Gatsby” and he dies having seen through his own pretending. His dream of a new life was shattered by fate and by his rediscovery of his own unrecognized past. After his funeral his friend Nick looks back over the lawn of his lovely estate and thinks of his friend Joe Gatz: “He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him.” Joe Gatz had run away from himself by creating a dream which could only fail because to escape himself he always had to run away from reality. This great American novel is really a partial retelling of the story of the prodigal son – but it only tells the story to the point where the son becomes aware of what he has made of himself. There is no redemption in Joe’s life.

But both the stories capture something of the reality of so much of our lives. Running away from the reality of our lives is so much of what goes on in our lives. Was the prodigal son running away from his father, from the daily grind of running the farm, or was he trying to find himself, or was he running away from himself? One thing seems likely and that is that he was running away from the truth about himself and the more he ran the further he found himself from the reality of his own life. This is why the story has such a familiar ring to it and why the parable resonates for us. In that running away we find echoes of that running in ourselves.

Was he running away from responsibility? Often we find it easier to avoid responsibility than to face up to it. Responsibility places a burden on our shoulders that we don’t want to bear. Accepting responsibility means accepting that there is someone else in the equation of our lives and accepting that other person means widening the horizons of our concerns in life beyond

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH HAMILTON
AUGUST 23, 2009

ourselves. The prodigal may simply be running away from responsibility to his father and his family. Responsibility does mean accepting that others are placing their trust in him and the easiest path is to abdicate that trust and run away. As the prodigal ran to the pleasures of the world, Joe Gatz ran to the pleasures of a new self-created character.

Perhaps the prodigal was running away from relationships. That too should be familiar to us. Some of the loneliest moments I have spent have been in crowded rooms – in receptions and parties – rooms full of people all talking at full speed with little or no communication being achieved. One can imagine our prodigal in the bars and fun spots of Alexandria in the midst of hilarious activity, but desperately lonely. The immaturity of this younger son of the family lies in his unwillingness to accept the commitment to the other person, for engagement with another person means taking that other person seriously and responding to that other person with a personal commitment.

Was that what was happening with our prodigal? Was he running away from commitment? And we can surely understand that!! There are so many demands upon us and those demands can be a burden. So often we want to ask not what we can do to help, but how can we master the situation, and to do that all we need to do is to stand free and uncommitted. If we have commitments we know we have to be involved and that limits the amount of control we have over the situation. Our culture seems to have fallen into a downward spiral of self-awareness. We think in terms of the self and how we can be free to do what it is we want to do. For many today the problem with marriage is that it raises demands and commitments from us which limit us. Many do not want to make that long-term commitment to the other person and do not want to give up any part of the self to a life-long partnership, with all that it entails.

Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* speaks for the prodigal, and too often for us, when he says: "How fine to set oneself a goal and drive one's way remorselessly towards it! To sever the bonds that bind one to one's home and friends." (Quoted by Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth*, p.182). The Prodigal Son wanted to fly with his own wings, be his own guide, accepting no other dream but his own, severing the bonds to home and friends. What he found was that the dream was an empty shell.

The pigsty is an appropriate image for what became reality for the prodigal. The only purpose in life is the consumption of food and he dwelt in the midst of the muck and refuse of life as he lived with the consumers of the garbage of life. This was the fate of the son who launched himself on a life ending on a dream of self-affirmation.

But there is another side to this story that we forget. It is also the story of the son who stayed at home. Just as we ask, "why did the prodigal leave home?" we might ask, "why did the eldest son stay at home?" There is a good side to wanting to leave home, and we should not forget that. To want to fly with one's own wings was not a bad thing in itself. What was wrong was that he thought that his own wings were sufficient and that he did not need to recognize that

**FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH HAMILTON
AUGUST 23, 2009**

he could never totally sever his commitments with others. The son who stayed at home, it seems to me, is in some ways in as much of a pickle as the prodigal son. But I think we all have some sympathy for this son. He stayed to do his duty, the long days feeding the animals, the hard work of tending the grapes and all the hard tasks of looking after a prosperous farm. Doesn't he have a right to be angry that his father gives such a public display of welcome and gratitude at his wastrel son's return? Surely, we ask, doesn't he have a right to feel resentment? That is a natural response – very human, after all. One can feel the creeping fear that this wastrel of a brother is going to get some more of his father's wealth and rob him of his own rightful inheritance. For that is at the base of the response. So he will have nothing to do with greeting his good-for-nothing brother.

But one is led to ask whether his commitment to his father is quite as deep as we would first have thought. Was his commitment more to himself and his future than to supporting his father?

What is most disturbing when you come to think of it is the fact that he thought that he was deserving of his father's gratitude. He had done his duty by staying at home, and therefore he thought that he deserved to have a party and the colorful gifts of homecoming. It is the resentment that is so clear in the eldest son's words and actions that seem to tell his tale to us.

The open welcome of the father to the prodigal son signifies God's total acceptance of the one who has recognized the emptiness of the human dream, the human creation, and the human self-conceit. What does the eldest son's refusal to accept the love and care of the father suggest? It certainly tells us how limited our response can be to God's love and care. You can see where his concern was really focused – on himself far more than on his father. There was resentment in his acceptance of his duty, which was not borne with grace or love. What he was doing was not out of love of his father but it would seem to have come as a grudging acceptance of a duty that would achieve its reward.

How does the elder brother compare with his younger sibling? Surely, the relationship to his father was as quite as flawed as was his brother's. His response to his father's invitation to welcome his brother home was full of resentment and one can sense the threat he felt that this return made to his livelihood. There is no love or care or sense of joy that his brother had returned. Rather, one can feel the questions that run around in his mind. What does this return mean for me? What do I have to give up now that my worthless brother has turned up again?

There is no love in his response to the return. There is no recognition that here is a human being asking for nothing except that he be accepted on the lowest of terms. The elder brother wants nothing to do with acceptance, he had given up any chance of getting away so that he could keep what he had and be safe. He will not accept his brother's return because he is afraid that he will be the loser.

**FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH HAMILTON
AUGUST 23, 2009**

The father's response tells us something of his understanding of both the son's wanderings and his return. He seems to understand the human dream of self-fulfillment and the desire to fly with one's own wings. He seems to understand the desire to stand on one's own two feet. But the younger son before his father's acceptance learns something important. To dream and to desire to strike out on one's own are important, but without the reciprocity of love they are bound to flounder. It is only when our dream of the future is placed in the commitment to the unbounded love of God that we are enabled to fly, indeed to soar with wings like eagles. But the father also understands and still accepts the elder brother. "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." The father accepts both without qualification.

Too often our temptation is to be like the son who stayed at home and feel that God owes us a living. But if that is how we see our duty to God and to others, then we may feel secure in our inheritance, but we have turned further away from our Father than did the prodigal son. The prodigal recognized that while he was feeding with the pigs he had even denied his own humanness.

The climax lies in this, the son who had realized the barrenness of his dream came home and recognized the love his father had for him. That recognition was all that was important. The son who stayed at home, because he did not see the barrenness of his dream of a self-satisfied life, shut himself off from his father's love. There lies the tragedy of the son who stayed at home, there was the tragedy of the one who did his duty, but who forgot his father's love. Duty can be as barren and empty as the life of the dissolute, because it begins to feed upon itself and in its selfish heart it builds a barrier against engaging the love of the person one serves. Duty, when it becomes a reason in itself loses its real reason for being. What is forgotten is the love that should permeate all action. Indeed even the love the father had for both his sons was forgotten in the resentment of duty's destructive force. The eldest brother also had a lesson to learn – a lesson that was as significant as the one the youngest son had to learn. God's love is unbounded and our response has to be open to that wonderful acceptance of our waywardness.

We must hold fast to the Father's love, and respond in love. Commitment will follow, and we will be able to dream dreams of a life that takes us into a future without resentment, with a loving concern for our brothers and sisters, whoever they may be.

JSM/August 23, 2009