

THE SECOND GREATEST LOVE STORY EVER TOLD

The Younger Son

Luke 15:11-24

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-younger-son/>

This morning we look more closely at the younger son in Jesus' story of the father and two sons. This younger son is a picture of us, in our rebellion from God. His sin, and ours, is best described as selfishness. That's the umbrella sin under which everything else fits. Ingratitude, thinking God owes us "our share," rebellion from love, an unwillingness to trust God, wastefulness, cherishing our addictions more than our home. It's all under the heading of selfishness, deeply ingrained in us. We see sin more clearly. Don Miller describes the addiction to selfishness as the most dangerous narcotic.

Another dimension of selfishness is social. Do you wonder why Rembrandt included other people in his famous painting, "The Return of the Prodigal Son" (he includes people not mentioned in the gospel)? It's because sin is never my private business. It always impacts others. The young man's impatience and waste impacted the family estate. On this MLK weekend, we are especially aware that sin has a social dimension. Our selfishness has ripples. Selfishness plays out in social structures as injustice.

The theme of shame is also front and center in this story. Please note in Rembrandt's famous painting of The Return of the Prodigal Son, we can't see the boy's face. But we sense his humiliation. In Rembrandt's work, the young man's head is shaved. That is what happens to prisoners in concentration or prison camps. It robs the person of any sense of identity. He is also depicted in his underwear, creating shame and embarrassment. He felt as if he was no longer human. He was eating like animal and living like one.

Maria Wright Stewart was a 19th century preacher and school teacher of African descent. She fought hard for the notion that she was a gift from God, not a curse. She once wrote, "The frowns of the world shall never discourage me nor its smiles flatter me..." And she was right, wasn't she? It's what God says about us that counts.

Note how this son beautifully pictures repentance. He didn't blame the pigs, his older brother or his dad. He said, "I have sinned..." And repentance moved from his head to his feet ("I will arise, v. 18... he went to his father," v 20). We don't really have anything to bring to God in this transaction of grace. Only this: I have sinned. And at least the boy still called his dad "father."

What happens when we repent? We run in to God's mercy! In the Matthew Henry commentary, we read that we are met with eyes of mercy, arms of mercy and lips of mercy (v. 20). A book was written a few years ago about a Lutheran pastor who ended up being chaplain to the Nazi officers who were tried at Nuremberg for war atrocities. During his lifetime, he ministered to the worst of the worst. Yet one of his favorite sayings was this: "God loves you...so much more than you know" [*Mission to Nuremberg*, by Tim Townsend, p. 307].

But please notice that the boy is not only forgiven; he is restored. The father orders that they bring the robe (no more shame). And here, the Greek word is intensive in Greek: “that robe—the finest one.” He orders that they bring the ring, which would have had the family crest or seal on it. And bring his sandals. You see, in these days, slaves were shoeless. Henri Nouwen points out that if we look carefully at Rembrandt’s painting, see a scar on the boy’s left foot, and we see one broken sandal. This past week, I was at The Buckner Center in Dallas, TX, where we packed shoes for orphans all over the world. Many times, the children in these facilities share clothing and never have anything to call their own—except for shoes! Their shoes are their own!

Note how other parts of the Bible line up so perfectly with this story: “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with your spirit that we are children of God. And if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:15-17).

Robe, ring, shoes and also a party. Remember? Sin is social, but so is forgiveness and restoration. If you desire to follow Jesus, you cannot do it alone. That was never God’s plan. You will never be able to do it without the church, without others. God wants us all to come home, to God, to each other, to a love that will never fail, because “God loves you—so much more than you know.”