

## Parables of Growth: The Prodigal

Texts on Sunday, November 14, 2004

Reading: Malachi 3: 7-12 ; Luke 15: 11-31

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Remember the joke about the Joke Teller's Club? They got tired of the time it took to tell the old jokes, so they assigned each a number. A member would stand to tell a joke: "Two-oh-One!" he'd say, and they'd fold with laughter. "Forty-seven." Uproarious mirth! One day, a new jokester rose for his turn. "One hundred thirteen." No sound. "One hundred thirteen." Nothing. "C'mon, men! What's the matter?" From the floor, someone shouted, "You didn't tell it right."

Some of Jesus' parables are as familiar to us as old jokes. Why do we still read them all the way through? Why not just say "Prodigal Son!" and meditate in the glow of memory? In a way, that probably does happen. The story has such well-defined, realistic characters. The events are clear and dramatic; the open-ended conclusion hangs the same old question: Will the elder son go in? In some measure, we stop listening as soon as we recognize the first notes of this story. The back pages of one Bible list all Jesus' parables by title and Bible reference and supplies a synopsis of the parable's meaning. This one is summarized as "The abundance of the Father's love." But that's the problem. If this story is just about that, then we really don't need to tell it anymore. Let's just say "God's love sure is abundant!" and let the preacher sit down. Would that satisfy your hungry heart?

It is too weak a thing to say the parable of the prodigal is "about God's love." It is about love and *you*. All of the parables are. Jesus speaks so that you may understand yourselves and grow into what you are made for; for without awareness and understanding, you cannot become human. The story has been called "The Prodigal Son" for at least five hundred years, but I think *we* forced that title on the story because we like Jesus to focus on ourselves, especially on the good we will receive if we straighten up and fly right... into God's arms. Our endless self-concern made up that title to keep us from facing up to God calling to us in all the characters. They are all you; you are *all* of them, and more besides. This story examines you through the lens of money. It is about you, grappling with your fears of scarcity and your desire for abundance.

I am going to talk with you this morning about money—the spirituality of money; how money in your life reveals your fear of scarcity and of your fear of death; and how money can become a practice of freedom and abundance. You begin as the son.

You are the son. The son wants what is coming to him now. Why? He is hungry for the pleasures this life affords to those with money. Their number is great. He wants a nice car. So do you. He wants a nice place to live. So do you. He wants to be around people, lots of people. He wants to shower them with gifts, as the old blues number has it.

Once I lived the life of a millionaire, spent all my money,  
didn't have no cares / Took all my friends out for a mighty  
good time—bought lots of liquor, champagne and wine / Then  
I began to fall so low, lost all my friends, had nowhere to go /  
If I ever get my hands on a dollar again, I'll squeeze it hard  
until that eagle grins... Nobody loves you, when you're down  
and out... and in your pocket, not one penny / As for friends,  
you don't have any...

Traditional church teaches that the son has gone bad, that's all. But the matter is far more complex. The son is you; you sang it already today: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love..." Why "prone to leave God?" Because we are scarcity-thinkers. We think there is never going to be enough. Never enough time. Never enough money. Never enough room. Never enough vacation. Never enough friendship. Never enough, so we wander after our wants. Why do Americans buy so much stuff on credit? They are hungry. Why do they eat themselves into obesity and heart disease? Because there is never enough. Why do we always titter at jokes about getting drunk? Why do people drink and deny they're over the limit? Because they're trying to escape from life's blunt fact, that there is never enough on earth. We are fond of pointing fingers at others for their sins, to defend ourselves as better than this or that miscreant. Christian faith teaches that such self-righteous distinctions are false. "There is only one sin," writes Simone Weil—"that we were not able to feed on God's light alone." You *are* the son, hungry for light.

As the son, we spend everything we've got—on ourselves; that is, on what brings us pleasure. It may be that we have serious responsibilities, to pay to shelter, feed, or educate family members. It is our project, nevertheless, and for most of us, it feels like there is never enough. We spend everything. Society approves of the way we spend—that's what makes a person "middle class." But society's approval keeps us from seeing that we are just like the son. Social norms mask the fact that we are anxious and afraid about money. We mostly do not experience the severe famine of the parable—unless we are wide awake. And then perhaps, like the son, we come to ourself.

We “come to.” And we leave the land we are in, in search for something that is not scarce.

The father. When the father was asked to give up a half share of his wealth to his son, he did so. The father expresses no scarcity-thinking. He is in the flow of life’s give and take. Flow is the opposite of scarcity-thinking, and the father knows the secret of flow. He is prodigal with his abundance. He knows that whatever you want to move in your life, that is what you give away, for more will return to you. “Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.” That is flow. That is a principle of happiness—giving and forgiving; holding nothing back; leaning into the arms of abundance, trusting in God, letting go, experiencing the power, the reality, of flow.

Plain water knows how to obey the law of flow. Down it comes from the heavens freely, there to return. Someone has observed that only the lowest life forms can live in water that has no flow. Flow is required for growth and development. Giving freely is not merely some species of decent behavior; it is a principle of the physics of the soul, as real and basic as the principle that balances a bicycle wheel. Learn to ride the principle of flow, and you leave the land of scarcity-thinking.

You are the father. You are free to love and to give like this. In our spiritual tradition, tithing is the primary practice of flow and freedom in the material world. Tithing is an experiment in faith and trust for those who see that they are no longer poor and bound in the land of scarcity, but rich in the land of flow, and freedom and faithfulness. You are the father.

But now the elder brother speaks. “This is unreasonable. I work hard. I deserve. I must watch out for my interests.” You are the elder brother. Of course. You know what it is like to experience no flow. Even though love is all around, you have sometimes felt all bound up. You get afraid. You don’t want to come to this party, not with this kind of flow. Scarcity-thinking takes over, for you and I are also afraid of becoming a new person. So you see this about yourself. Who sees?

The father! You are the father. “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” Nothing is separate from the One, nothing at all. Certainly not money, for deep down, money is just an idea, an access to your living testimony about what is real, what lasts, and what does not.

Some people say, But can’t I offer my time as a gift to God instead of my money? Look at the spirit of the question, and you will know the answer. If the question grows in a bed of anxious scarcity-thinking, then switching the subject from money to time is like trying

to pull the wool over God's eye. But of course you can tithe time—if you want more time! In the spirit of flow, all that you give you are giving to yourself—to Christ within. But when you hear the elder brother in you making excuses, then gently draw him toward his brother, Christ alive in you. Invite him into the feast. That is the way of the faithful: first, *see* what is happening, then *experiment* with an actual practice of freedom in the abundance of the father. For you are the father, and free people act free.

In our consecration of giving this Sunday coming, remember: we are not fund-raising. We are flow-raising. Come to the party.

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