

**“The Prodigal Father”**  
**Luke 15:11-32**

The morning TV shows have been filled with wonderful stories about fathers who are regarded as heroes by their children. A couple of years ago Tim Russert captured a lot of attention with a book about the close relationship he has with his father, *Big Russ and Me*. Russert had such an overwhelming response from readers which produced another book, *Wisdom of Our Fathers: Lessons and Letters from Daughters and Sons*. Over the years, I have heard moving testimonies about fathers in eulogies given at funerals.

Not all relationships between fathers and their children are as heartwarming. We know there are many dead-beat dads, men who have abandoned their wives and children. It is estimated that one-half of the world’s children will spend part of their childhood without a father in the home. Other fathers are oppressively authoritarian, if not abusive. Others show no feelings whatsoever toward their children. Others are so busy with their “busyness” that they aren’t around, or so withdrawn and incapable of showing any feelings they might have.

In my self-centered moments, I wonder what my son and daughter would say about me. I shudder to think. Better than focusing on ourselves and what our children may think of us or how we regard our own fathers, let’s accept the invitation to focus on a heavenly Father who will never fail us. To do so, let’s turn to a familiar story about a father who had two sons and who never failed them.

The parable is commonly called “The Prodigal Son,” but it’s more about two sons. Both are lost in their own way. One strays and feels lost; the other stays and feels lost. You might say that the two short parables that precede this one in Luke 15 are parallel stories. One is about a lamb that strayed away from the flock. The shepherd did not stop searching for it until he found it. The other is about a woman who loses a coin. She turned the whole house upside down until she found it.

I have another way of describing the lostness of the two boys. For a couple of years, a book that has captured a lot of attention in our politically polarized land is by Jim Wallis, “God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It.”<sup>1</sup> You might say that one boy gets it wrong and the other boy doesn’t get it. I’ll leave up to you to decide which one you think is on the political / theological right and which one is on the political / theological left.

Having said all this, however, the parable is not primarily about the two sons. Jesus introduces it this way: **“There was a man who had two sons.”** No, the focus is on the father, a prodigal father, if you will. From a human point of view the father is regarded as wasteful of his time and resources on these two ingrates. Such is the father’s love.

When the younger concludes that living at home wasn’t such a bad deal after all, he heads for home, rehearsing his litany of confession and planning to ask only that his father consider him as one of the hired hands. Note the movement of the 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.”** He started his litany, but his father wasn’t listening. The father had been waiting patiently, but when his eye catches the boy coming up the path he suddenly becomes impatient. He couldn’t wait to clothe him with love – the best robe, a ring and sandals for his feet. There’s an old African - American spiritual that goes, *I got shoes, you got shoes, All God’s children got shoes. When I get*

*to Heaven gonna put on my shoes, Gonna walk all over God's heaven.* Shoes were a sign of liberation. Basic necessities such as shoes were rare in the slave quarters. The younger son thought his inheritance would buy him freedom, but it only led him into a kind of slavery he never could have imagined.

He never had the chance to ask about being one of his father's hired hands. One commentator suggests that the father didn't want another hired hand around the house. He wanted his son. "He would either be a dead son or a son raised from the dead, a lost son or a found son, but a son, not a hired hand!"<sup>2</sup> And so Jesus said, "**I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing...**"<sup>3</sup>

And when the elder brother refused to go into the party because he thought the old man loved his brother more than him, note the movement of the father. "**His father came out and began to plead with him.**" "I love you just as much as your brother, but I love you both in different ways because you are different people. **Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.**" Was the elder son in such a snit that he had forgotten he also received his half of the inheritance, that the deed to the farm had already been signed over to him?

If you haven't already noticed, on page 9 of the bulletin is a note about a book in the church library – *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, by Henri Nouwen.<sup>4</sup> There should be a long waiting list of those who would like to borrow it. It's about Nouwen's own spiritual journey as he meditated a 17<sup>th</sup> century painting Rembrandt, one of the last before his death. *The Return of the Prodigal Son* hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Nouwen tells of how he identified himself with the elder brother in many ways, always comparing himself to others, often looking down on others. Add to that was his strained relationship with his father. I'd like to share a brief passage with you.

"[One day] I lived, very concretely in my own flesh, the return of the elder son. While hitchhiking, I was hit by a car and soon found myself in a hospital close to death. There I suddenly had the illuminating insight that I would not be free to die as long as I was still holding on to the complaint of not having been loved enough by the one whose son I am. I realized that I had not yet grown up completely. I felt strongly the call to lay to rest my adolescent complaints and to give up the lie that I am less loved than my younger brothers. It was frightening, but very liberating. When my dad, far advanced in years, flew over from Holland to visit me, I knew that this was the moment to claim my own God-given sonship. For the first time in my life, I told my father explicitly that I loved him and was grateful for his love for me. I said many things that I had never said before and was surprised at how long it had taken me to say them. My father was somewhat surprised and even puzzled by it all, but received my words with understanding and a smile. As I look back on this spiritual event, I see it as a true return, the return from a false dependence on a human father who cannot give me all I need to a true dependence on the divine Father who says: "You are with me always, and all I have is yours"; the return also from my complaining, comparing, resentful self to my true self that is free to give and receive love. And even though there have been, and undoubtedly will continue to be, many setbacks, it brought me to the beginning of the freedom to live my own life and die my own death. The return to the "Father from whom all fatherhood takes its name"

allows me to let my dad be no less than the good, loving, but limited human being he is, and to let my heavenly Father be the God whose unlimited, unconditional love melts away all resentments and anger and makes me free to love beyond the need to please or find approval.”<sup>5</sup>

Note the movement of his father, though quite elderly, he flew from Holland to visit him in his affliction. That’s the Biblical story in a nutshell. God is always moving toward us, transcending oceans and oceans and oceans that separate us from him. It all starts in the Garden when Adam and Eve hide from God. Note the movement of the father. “In the rustling grass I hear Him pass, He speaks to me everywhere.”<sup>6</sup> **“Adam, where are you?”**<sup>7</sup>

God is love<sup>8</sup> and love is patient and kind and does not insist on its own way.<sup>9</sup> And so the prodigal father patiently waited on the front porch for his son to return. To paraphrase St. Augustine, “God’s heart is restless until it finds us resting in him.”

We sometimes sing these words about Jesus:

Love caused your incarnation  
Love brought you down to me  
Your thirst for my salvation  
Procured my liberty.<sup>10</sup>

So many think they have to find God, but it is God who takes the initiative and moves toward us. As Nouwen discovered that he had to allow his dad to be his dad; all we have to do is to allow God to be our Father, yea, Abba, Father, that is, “Daddy.”<sup>11</sup>

“Here is the God I want to believe in,” says Nouwen, “a Father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting; never letting his arms droop down in despair, but always hoping that his children will return so that he can speak words of love to them and let his tired arms rest on their shoulders. His only desire is to bless.”<sup>12</sup>

I never saw any part of the TV series, *The Sopranos*, but this past week we all heard a lot about it. The last show ended with the Soprano family gathering at a New Jersey-area diner to commiserate, as always, over food. Suddenly, in the midst of it all, the TV screen cut to black while the series’ theme song, “Don’t Stop Believing,” faded into the background.<sup>13</sup> It ended so abruptly that people thought they lost the TV signal.

This parable also cuts to black with a party in the background. I imagine the father singing, “Please Start Believing.” It’s unresolved. We never know whether the elder son goes into the party. Always the obedient son, you’d think he’d bow to his father’s request. So let’s surmise that he does go to the party, but we still do not know if he gives his brother a bear-hug to welcome him home. Would we?

It even cuts to the black with regard to the son who strayed away. Yes, he’s at the party, but he returned home planning to be just another hired hand, seeking to earn his father’s love and acceptance. At such a point he’s no different than his older brother. We never know if on the next morning he does his share of the chores, not because his father regards him as a hired hand, not

because he considers working his duty, but because his father regards him as his beloved son and a son who knows he is beloved, cannot do otherwise.

We never know if either boy finally gets it. Do we?

1. HarperSanFrancisco, ©2005
2. Robert Farrar Capon
3. John 15:15
4. New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1992
5. Ibid. p. 82-83
6. *This Is My Father's World*, Maltbie Babcock, 1901
7. Genesis 3:9
8. 1 John 4:8
9. See 1 Corinthians 13
10. *O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?*, Paul Gerhardt, 1653
11. See Mark 14:36
12. Nouwen, p. 96
13. Missoulia.com 6/14/07