

## **Courage to Love**

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

March 27, 2022

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

We often ask as we hear a Scripture: *What do we hear in this story?* If Love Another question that we should ask here at St. Andrew's, if we truly "Love our neighbours" (gesture to the banner), loving our nearest and dearest as well as stranger, is: *Where is love found in the parable of the prodigal?*

There is a question that I don't ask enough of Scripture stories, however, that is: *What do we **not** see in this story, this parable?* I'll come back to this question shortly.

First, let us gather our collective wisdom about what and who we see in this parable of Jesus.

The younger son asks for his inheritance while dad is alive. In ancient and even modern conventions in Palestine and Israel, this is a shocking ask, akin to wishing dad was dead.<sup>1</sup> Unbelievably, the father gives him the money. The son happily heads off into a life of extravagance, and probably a lifestyle that would horrify his family. He ultimately goes broke, and, as this Gospel parable says, "...came to himself".

*He comes to himself*, meaning that he hits bottom, and, not unlike anyone struggling with an addiction, or a person in trouble who is too proud to ask for help, life becomes increasingly burdensome and unliveable. No money, having shut out those who love us, if we survive all of this, and there is no intervention to stop the downward spiral, we end up broke, broken, ashamed. We get so desperate that we, reluctantly, reach out for help.

I have witnessed situations like this firsthand. How about you? Poignant moments after the pride, self-centredness turns to fear and self-loathing. In the Hebrew Scriptures<sup>2</sup> there is an infamous story that I'm sure Jesus as a Jewish leader knew well. Jacob was a wheeler and dealer, and swindled his older twin brother Esau out of his inheritance. Jacob got as far from Esau as he could, built up a fortune, while Esau's resentment for his brother built and built. Jacob heard in the grapevine that his brother was looking for him.

Jacob was afraid, tormented – probably fueled by shame and remorse for the harm he had caused his brother. *Fight or flight*, there is that reflex action that is often chosen for self preservation. But Jacob chose neither, he instead opted to accept whatever consequences came.

There was a dramatic vision of a wrestling match with a divine character, a symbolic injury, a manifestation of his brokenness. A reader new to the Bible might have guessed that Jacob was going to, should have, faced severe consequences. To Jacob's surprise and relief, Esau embraces him. This storyline strains our sense of reality and justice. All

---

<sup>1</sup> Working Preacher Commentary. Niveen Sarras offers a commentary on the Prodigal Parable from a Palestinian-Christian perspective: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-151-3-11b-32-5>

<sup>2</sup> The story of the disastrous relationship between Jacob and Esau is told in the Hebrew Scriptures book of Genesis, chapters 27 through 33: <https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=John+12:1-11&vnum=yes&version=nrsv>

those years lying and manipulating, how can Jacob escape justice? Justice has a different look, though, when love wins.

Back to the Prodigal story, we know the rest: the younger brother is completely gobsmacked when dad welcomes him home with a party. Surprised doesn't begin to describe the older brother's profoundly negative reaction. We see the conflict, the hurt of the older brother, as he expresses his anger to father. What we don't see, and what I wonder about and must fill in the blanks, is, what happened next?

Dad was magnanimous in his love and generosity welcoming the lost son home. Luke is the only Gospel to offer this story, incidentally. It is part of a sequence of Jesus telling three parables about things *once lost that are found*: The Lost Sheep, the Woman Losing her little coin, and this Prodigal Son. It about repentance, but also about how priceless the little things are to God.

As I think about that grace expressed by the father describing how much he loves both boys, I cannot help but recall the passage I use at most weddings:

Love never gives up.  
Love cares more for others than for self.  
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.  
Love doesn't strut,  
Doesn't have a swelled head,  
Doesn't force itself on others,  
Isn't always "me first,"  
Doesn't fly off the handle,  
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,  
Doesn't revel when others grovel... [1 Cor 13: 4, 5 MSG]

Easy to say, much more difficult to live, when I feel hurt by someone I love very much. I wonder, then: *How might reconciliation happen between the father and his older son; or, between the resentful older brother and the impetuous-yet-remorseful younger brother?*

The party dies down late in the night, people sleep off the wine. How painful the healing process would have been, in days after the return of the youngest brother. Restorative Justice<sup>3</sup>, a very challenging alternative system to our conventional criminal justice system, attempts to do the hard work of nurturing repentance and healing. The primary focus is on the victim's wellbeing<sup>4</sup>, the pace of the process of truth telling and deep, painful, listening varies according to what the victim needs. But there are more people harmed than just the primary victim, aren't there? There are the families of the victim and offender, the witnesses to the conflict, and the offender too.

Strange to imagine the unconditionally loving dad as one doing hurting. The primary harm is caused by the younger brother, of course, but there are some complex issues to work out between the siblings.

---

<sup>3</sup> For more concrete example of Restorative Justice in action, click on this link for a partnership between the Mennonite Central Committee in Canada (MCC) and Correctional Service of Canada: <https://lte-ene.ca/en/have-you-heard-faith-community-reintegration-program>

<sup>4</sup> To see a more comprehensive perspective on RJ, an article published by the Quakers (Society of Friends): <https://quakerservice.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Restorative-Justice-Policy-Paper-CFCN-CCJC-3Nov2016.pdf>

Honestly, I don't think that that emotionally dug-in older brother is going to show a lot of love and openness for a long time. But isn't the love of the father inspirational, in his mind it isn't a "zero-sum game", that is he does not intend that one son gets love to the detriment of the other. No way, the joy pours out of that parent – the capacity of his love, of God's love, is limitless.

From some of my own lived experience, I've been hurt and have been the one doing the harming at times – healing takes time. It starts by the one doing the hurt understanding what they did. That older brother is not going to believe the younger one, when little brother expresses remorse truthfully, the first, maybe not even after the second or third try. But love has a way of softening the bitterness shell. Love is not a process. Instead, I see it is a superpower planted in all of us, a force that chips away at our armour. It reminds us that we are better together than alone. Love coaxes us to trust again, even if we are a bit wiser when we happen to be loving a recovering self-centred narcissist.

Love reminds us that we too have harmed. We too have been forgiven, over and over again, and it feels so good. Amen