

“In My Life”

The Reverend Damaris D. Whittaker

Scripture: Luke 15: 11-32b

March 10, 2013

*“I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him,
“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.”*

We are invited by the Scripture this morning to revisit one of the most famous and compelling parables in the Bible - the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Charles Dickens described this story as the greatest short story ever told.

This morning, I want to invite us to identify with one of the characters. Think about how you would tell the story from the point of view of your favorite character.

Perhaps you identify more with the older brother, who felt unappreciated, maybe because you yourself were an older sibling and know first-hand what it is to see a younger brother or sister get away with anything. Maybe you yourself have thought, “What does one have to do around here to get party?” or perhaps you have said many times growing up, “That is not fair.”

As you do that, I invite you to keep in mind that the older brother in the story, according to scholars, was going to inherit two thirds of the estate, with the rest divided up among all the other heirs.

Maybe you see yourself as the younger brother who wanted to be free and live his own life. Explore the world and begin anew. How exciting to create our own path and maybe ride into the sunset.

But, I carefully remind you that in order to give the inheritance to the younger son, the father had to sell land. Leslie Hoppe writes that selling the land was a shameful thing in a land-based economy in which Jewish families would not have sold their

land because they were a gift from God.¹ This had great implications, not just to the family, but for the community.

Or, perhaps you see yourself as the Father, who is kind and forgiving. On one hand, I think all of us, to a certain degree, admire the father; on the other hand, we have been bewildered by his character.

But, what strikes me personally about this story is not necessarily a character, but the act of returning home. The younger son was feeding pigs, and he remembered that in his father's house, the servants had enough bread to spare; and there he was, dying of hunger. So, he remembered what it was to have his father again. And, as a matter of fact, he still feels free to call him "father." He still feels a sense of belonging. He still feels that he can go back.

An issue of Motive

Scholars question the sincerity of the younger son's repentance—they question his motive! But, does it matter? I personally think what matters are his actions.

I think that many of us are not much different than the prodigal son when it comes to what has motivated us to come to God.

Parker Palmer suggests that:

*Many of us act from motives that are not entirely benign, on terms that are not always our own. We may act, not by choice, but on demand...we often must launch our actions from motives and circumstances that are less than ideal. What is the process by which we might accept an undesirable impetus to action, and yet allow our action to be transformed into something of beauty and truth that transcends its original constraints. Sometimes we might be outwardly called to our inward truth."*²

¹ Leslie J. Hoppe, "Exegetical Perspective, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32," Feasting C, Vol. 2, 119.

² Parker Palmer, The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring, Pg 59.

So, what are the experiences that take us back to God?

More importantly this morning, I invite us to remember, if at all possible, that turning point, that “aha” moment, that life-changing experience that led us to decide to have a relationship with God; that led us to say, “I will serve God with all of my heart” -- and let us remember how we felt at that moment. What changes did that bring forth in us? Was it something pronounced, or something subtle?

Reconciliation

You know, reconciliation is a pronounced theme in this story, but sometimes coming back home is not simple. It is complicated.

During this Lent season, it is possible that we may be experiencing alienation from all of those things around us? But -- have we contributed to this alienation? How do we find our way back home?

Perhaps it is us who are feeling lost. Today, we often attribute the image of lost to someone who is foreign to us, someone who, perhaps, is not even here. But, what if *we* are the ones who are lost, looking for our way home.

Is it possible that we have lost our way, even if we have continued to do the same things year after year? Is it possible to be lost even if we have not left the father's house? For I believe that both sons were lost to the father.

The Beatles had a song: “In My Life,” and the song invites to consider the places that we remember. I invite you consider the place where you crossed paths with God. When did God, in some shape or form, become real to you?

Are we close to the Father's house, or are we lost in a country of our own making? Are we in need to return back home? Are we in need to return to the basics in our relationship with God?

If we feel lost - do we remember? Do we remember?

Here at Worship is where we celebrate homecoming every week, of all who have been lost -- including all of us. Here is where we abandon thoughts of righteousness. Here is where we leave resentments and fears about who is coming to the celebration and who is going to be sitting at the table with us. Here is where we return from our alienation, from being in the far-away country that we have created.

In our life, have we lost affection for our relationship with God? Or, are we celebrating that it could become something new when we return home?

Here is where we remember, and we turn to God and say, "Of all of the experiences I've had -- in my life, God, I love you more." Amen.