

## ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 14 MARCH 2010

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

### “Lent – What Really Matters to a Loving God”

#### 1. Reading with subjective eyes!

Our extended parable in Luke 15 has come to be named, *The Prodigal Son*! Yet the word “prodigal” does not appear in the Greek! The Oxford English Dictionary, gives the meaning, “given to extravagant expenditure; recklessly wasteful of one’s property or means.” The OED cites the first usage to the early sixteenth century.

There are many interpretations and inferences placed into this story.

Barbara Brown Taylor graphically reminds us how subjective interpretations of Scripture can be:

The problem with a really good parable—especially one as beloved as this one—is that it can become limp from too much handling. Like the velveteen rabbit, it can lose its eyes, its whiskers, and a lot of its stuffing, until it conforms to the arms of whoever picks it up.[\[1\]](#)

So, let’s add some insights, to deepen a more responsible reading.

The Greek word that invited the use of the word, prodigal, would have been “scattering” (*diaskorpizo*), suggesting the extravagant waste of the money, and the word *asotos*”[\[2\]](#) suggesting, “without any thought of future consequences”. And here is a silent metaphor expressing the outrageous and hopeless situation, as “*asotos*” actually means “unsaveable”. He is living just for the moment, with disastrous consequences, unseen to himself.

Another example of a major misinterpretation is brought out by Richard Jensen:

The son goes out and squanders his property in dissolute living. Eastern commentators do not take this to mean a necessarily immoral lifestyle on the part of the son. He is a spend-thrift to be sure. ... We often talk about the Prodigal as being engaged in all kinds of immoral activities. Eastern commentators do not read it that way. It is the Elder Brother who suggests that the Prodigal has spent his money on prostitutes (v. 30). The Elder Brother is not a very reliable source of information on the matter! [\[3\]](#)

And yet, while it is important to take the original meaning of the Greek words and story in its ancient cultural context, we must bring our own subjectivity to the reading and interpretation.

#### 2. Some subjective readings

Lindsey Crittenden brings her own story of her younger brother’s drug experience to create a moving interpretation of this parable.[\[4\]](#) One that exposes our Lenten journey to greater light!

She confesses her identification with the elder brother! The resentment at the way her parents

forgive her younger brother, absolutely, on each occasion! He always promised he would kick the habit.

He couldn't, of course. He hit bottom once, twice, three times — each hit bottoming further and further. He went in and out of drug rehab. In the early hours of January 8, 1994, he drove away without paying for a vial of crack and was shot in the head.[\[5\]](#)

And she admits that in the reality of her family story,

My brother finally admitted his powerlessness in the face of drugs, but for most of the squandering and bailing out, he and my parents colluded in a kind of sick and tragic game.

Her wisdom she celebrated was: that families can be dangerously collusive; that her younger brother could only leave the “far country” of drugs if he “came to himself” and travelled past his addiction. And she owned her own journey from the “far country”:

I've had to make a turn, too, away from anger and resentment. We don't know how the elder brother responds — if he joins the party, or if he storms off in a huff — but the implication seems clear. The father's love is big enough for both.

### **3. *The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family***

Barbara Brown Taylor presents another re-reading, different to, she says, “The way most Christians tell it, it is about our individual relationships with God.”[\[6\]](#) She names it, *The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family*. She says that we must see the parable in the context of Jesus' Middle Eastern world, a world in which:

huge honor [is] owed the patriarch of a clan, and the elaborate code for keeping that honor in place. Patriarchs did not run. Patriarchs did not leave their places at the heads of their tables when guests were present. Patriarchs did not plead with their children; they told their children what to do.

Told in this kind of culture, today's parable becomes the parable of the dysfunctional family—a story about a weak patriarch with an absentee wife and two rebellious sons he seems unable to control, who is willing to sacrifice his honor to keep his community together. It's a reunion story, not a repentance story. It's about the high cost of reconciliation, in which individual worth, identity and rightness all go down to the dust so that those as good as dead in their division may live together in peace.[\[7\]](#)

So, when the elder brother, who is as pig-headed as the younger brother, refuses to come into the house, insulting his father, what does the father do? Without concern for family honour, and how his community will see him, and about the power community gives him, he humiliates himself, sacrifices honour and goes out to his elder son. Life is messy, family is messy, so he gets messy! Why? Because the well-being of the whole family is his honour and joy!

### **4. “Who am I becoming?”**

A final interpretation by Joan Chittister, who suggests that this parable “asks the question, “Who am I becoming?” in a world that prefers to shape appearances and create images rather than trade in

the real thing.”[\[8\]](#)

She uses a Sufi story to enable us to grasp its wisdom:

Once upon a time ... a Sufi stopped by a flooding riverbed to rest. The rising waters licked the low-hanging branches of trees that lined the creek. And there, on one of them, a scorpion struggled to avoid the rising stream. Aware that the scorpion would drown soon if not brought to dry land, the Sufi stretched along the branch and reached out his hand time after time to touch the stranded scorpion that stung him over and over again. But still the scorpion kept its grip on the branch. "Sufi," said a passerby, "Don't you realize that if you touch that scorpion it will sting you?" And the Sufi replied as he reached out for the scorpion one more time, "Ah, so it is, my friend. But just because it is the scorpion's nature to sting does not mean that I should abandon my nature to save.”[\[9\]](#)

Now before we theologise too quickly, thinking she is going to draw us to God and the father who is willing to do anything for both his children, she takes us down another road.

The Sufi story assists the parable to raise questions about ourselves, as whether we are willing to recognise ourselves as complex works in progress in a paradoxical world. This story challenges “normal” ways of thinking, feeling and acting.

Chittister suggests another way of looking. That the three separate people are really part of us. Imagine, she suggests, that they are more caricature than character, more types than persons. This story in our Lenten journey, then,

is not about three discrete individuals -- one profane, one righteous, one dauntlessly loving - - as much as it is, surely, about the tug of each of these archetypes in the center of ourselves. It is a blueprint that leaves us asking ourselves which one of them we ourselves are really most like and which one of them is strongest in us right now.[\[10\]](#)

Her suggestion is profound. It challenges our need to oversimplify our selves and our life. And she tells us we know, deep down, that we are a spiritual jumble of at least three subjects: the loving parent, whose judgement we at times question; the reckless child, imagining we are free, life will be easy and happy, the centre of attention; and then the dutiful elder child, keep all the rules, expect others to keep them, sacrifice, and then become resentful and angry, with God and others, and punish others and ourselves, if life does not go our way.

[this] deep down [part] in us, ... [is] the part of the human soul that knows that life is a progression of struggles meant to be endured, a succession of stumblings from which we are meant to learn, a cycle of events meant to be drained of every insight, every glory that life has to give. This is the part of us that knows that life is not a series of mindless sins, nor is it simply a series of hard-garnered graces. It is a high wire act between the two that is meant to give us heart for those around us who have yet to negotiate the contest.

Always, from somewhere subterranean in the human soul comes the call of the Profligate Parent, the one who knows the way of human development, who knows that the nature of the human being is to be fully human ... and who therefore forgives wrongs. This is the part of us that calls us beyond ourselves to perfect love for the rest of the world that is just as stumbling and just as sincere as we are.

We are each the child who is squandering the treasure called life. We are each the child who

is judging those who do not do life as we do. We are each called to be the one who forgives the stumbling self and celebrates the efforts of the other. We have no proof that the erring child reformed and stayed home. We only know that this child tried to begin again and that the trying itself was enough for the loving parent. We have no surety that the perfect child ever escaped the imperfection of jealous perfection. We have no proof that the parent was not stung time and again by both of them. We only know that the parent understood the struggles -- and forgave them.

We have no assurance in which way lies salvation but we do know, this parable says, that it is not the results that count. It is the becoming, the Fourth Sunday of Lent teaches us, that really matters to a loving God whose nature is to save us from the stings in all our souls as we become and become and become...[\[11\]](#)

---

[\[1\]](#) Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family*, <http://www.barbarabrowntaylor.com/newsletter374062.htm>

[\[2\]](#) Brian Stoffregen, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke15x1.htm>

[\[3\]](#) Richard Jensen, *Preaching Luke's Gospel*, 172; cited in Brian Stoffregen, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke15x1.htm>

[\[4\]](#) Lindsey Crittenden, *Turn, Turn, Turn*, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20100308JJ.shtml>

[\[5\]](#) Barbara Brown Taylor, *Op cit.*

[\[6\]](#) *Ibid.*

[\[7\]](#) *Ibid.*

[\[8\]](#) Joan Chittister "Not the results that count, but the becoming - Lent and Sufism philosophy". *National Catholic Reporter*. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1141/is\\_20\\_37/ai\\_72273904/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_20_37/ai_72273904/)

[\[9\]](#) *Op cit.*

[\[10\]](#) *Op cit.*

[\[11\]](#) *Op cit.*