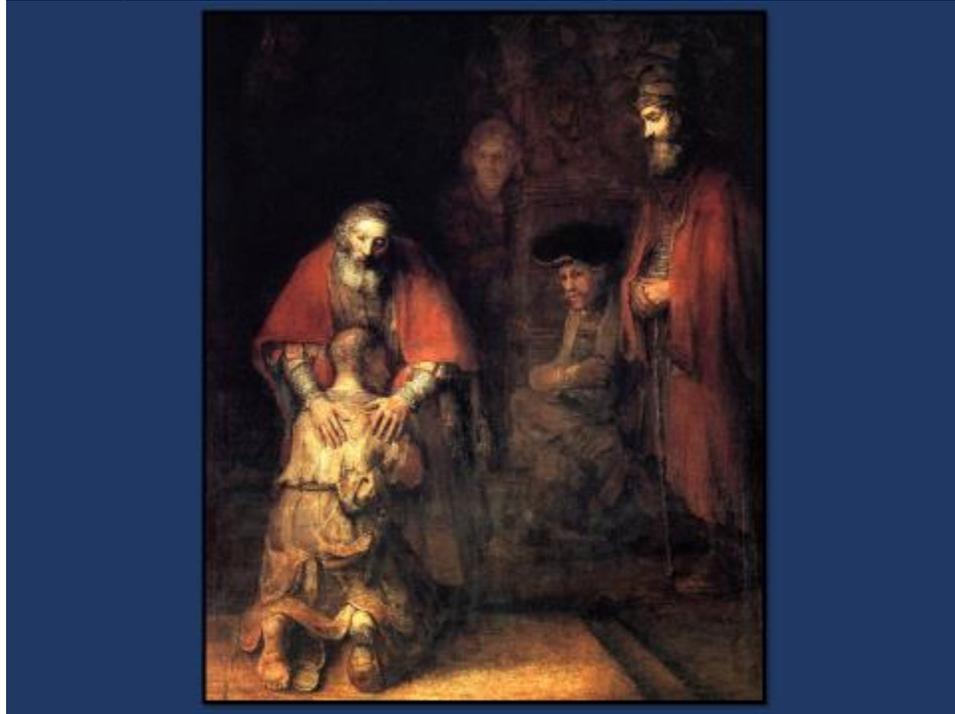


I. Intro.

A. Biblical story of the Prodigal Son is one that most of us know very well, yet one which can still speak powerfully to us

1. In the past I've used a famous painting by Rembrandt to illustrate the story. It's called Return of the Prodigal Son



and it

inspired an excellent book of the same name by author Henri Nouwen

2. While I will not take time today to explore features of the painting, I still find it a valuable image to have in front of us now

B. If you're like me, the 1st characters you think of in this story are ... the father and the younger son.

1. They are the most prominent & colorful characters ... The ones that first catch our eyes.
2. But the rather boring older son, who stays in the background and plays by the rules, has a very important part as well
3. This morning I'm asking you to consider, "*Who do you identify with in this story Jesus told?*"

II. For thousands of years, Xian sermons and artwork about this parable have tended to **call our attention to the younger son**

A. Hence we have the one song in our hymnbooks that retells

this story ("Far, far away from my loving Father", which we sang).

1. The song speaks entirely from younger son's perspective.
2. Did you notice that? The younger son is the volatile one, the wild one, the obviously sinful one

B. Can you relate to the younger son?

1. Maybe some of you have been prodigal children yourselves
 - a) You can identify easily w/ wandering away from home
 - b) You know a little about rejecting your parents & their values or even rejecting God at some time
2. A few of you might remember yourselves in a place much like the ragged & forlorn young man on his knees in the painting ... down & out ... utterly vulnerable
3. You've shed bitter tears of embarrassment ... known the humiliation of having to eat crow & realizing everyone knows you screwed up

C. But I also recognize that for most of you here today, that's not you. Your story is not really the story of the prodigal son or daughter. So for you (for us) I want to focus more on the older son ...

III. (The Older son)

A. On the outside he's the obvious good guy

1. He obeys the rules, stays at home, fulfills expectations ... his loyalty & stability would make any parent proud
2. But the story reveals another side to him:
 - a) Comes in from field to find a party going on
 - Becomes indignant because no one came out to tell him about it
 - Bad mood worsens to find the party's for his worthless brother
 - b) So he stops fulfilling his usual role. Refuses to go in, which is an insult to his father
 - c) For the father to have to go out to the older son & beg him to come in would have been a humiliation for the old man
 - d) Then, almost as if rubbing salt in the wound, this son argues w/ his father about being treated unfairly
3. On the outside, the older son may appear to have it all together, but on the inside he's also lost ... he has wandered away from his father through bitterness, anger, self-righteousness & resentment
4. Nouwen makes a good point: The father has two lost children, not just one. The older son is just as lost as the younger one!

B. Personally I can identify w/ the older son

1. I've grown up as the obedient "good boy", following the rules ... as a kid I tried hard to fulfill my duties & not disappoint my parents
2. Secretly, I've often envied the "prodigal friends" around me ...
 - a) They have more fun ... they get away with things that I can't
 - b) I sometimes silently condemn someone else's behavior, but then wonder why I don't have the nerve to do it myself
3. I know those feelings of resentment for thinking my reliability and dutifulness are being unappreciated

C. You, too, may be like the older son IF ...

1. You frequently *feel unappreciated*, like you didn't get your due
2. Often *make comments designed to draw pity* or attract attention
3. Find yourself *robbed of joy*, w/ life feeling more of a burden than an opportunity

D. If these things apply to you, then you too may find yourself squarely w/in this story

1. The sins of the prodigal son are much easier to identify than those of the older son ... The lost-ness of the older son is less visible
2. In his book, Henri Nouwen poses a razor-sharp Q for Christians (like me) who feel good about not being prodigals:

" ... I wonder which does more damage, lust or resentment? There is so much resentment among the 'just' and the 'righteous'. There is so much judgment, condemnation, and prejudice among the 'saints'. There is so much frozen anger among the people who are so concerned about avoiding 'sin'."

(Henri Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son, Doubleday, c1992, p. 71)

- a) Bible story does not tell us if the older son came in or stayed out ... there's no confession from him ... Did he ever get reconciled w/ his brother ... w/ his father? We don't know
- b) It's up to us to finish the story ... & recognizing our own lostness is the 1st step
3. Here's a key understanding for this text: Both sons were lost. Both missed the mark. In what ways are you lost?

IV. It may not feel very good to see ourselves as lost children, but **the Good News in this parable rests in the amazing welcoming love of God**

A. There's an invitation here to come back home for both types of lost sons

1. For the "younger sons"

- a) If you've run away & rejected godly values, turned your back on home & God, it's not too late to turn around
- b) Only be ready to say "Father, I have sinned ..." & God is ready to welcome you home as a beloved child anyway ... God wants to treat you like royalty
- c) Maybe today is that turning point for you

2. For the "older sons" among us

- a) This is the harder task ... to start living joyfully & allow others to do the same ... To allow God to welcome wayward sinners just as much as God welcomes you
- b) Coming home to God is hard if you think you already are home, without realizing how cold & distant you've become

B. Coming home to God is not easy ... but it's made easier by 1 fact about God which we often overlook:

1. God is out there looking for you right now

- a) Just as the father in the story didn't wait for the younger son to set foot in his house but the father ran a long way to meet him ...
- b) Just as he went outside to meet his stubborn older son & beg him to come into the party ... God is looking for you right now

2. I like how Nouwen words this truth:

God wants to find me as much as, if not more than, I want to find God. (repeat) Yes, God needs me as much as I need God. God is not the patriarch who stays home, doesn't move, and expects his children to come home, apologize for their aberrant behavior, beg for forgiveness, and promise to do better. To the contrary, he leaves the house, ignoring his dignity by running toward them, pays no heed to apologies and promises of change, and brings them to the table richly prepared for them.

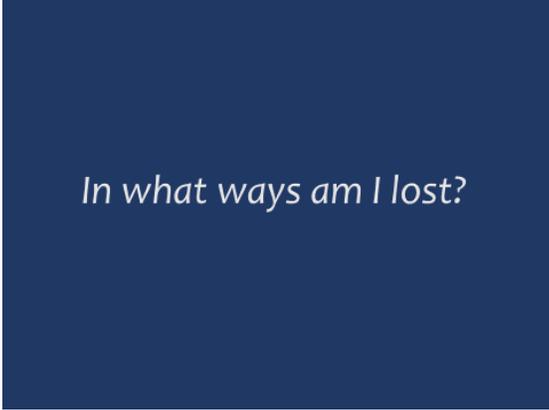
(Nouwen, p. 106)

3. God wants to find you even more than you may want to find God. Are you ready to come home?

V. Conclusion

A. The amazing embrace of God is wide open for both of the lost sons in the story

- 1. It's wide open for you, too, no matter if your lost-ness is in wild living and deliberately rejecting God ...
- 2. Or if you're lost due to coldness, self-righteousness and resentment
- 3. In a few moments of silence, I invite you to ponder once more the question I raised earlier, In what ways am I lost?



In what ways am I lost?

B. Let us ponder together the ways that we are lost ...