

Into Self Yet Coming
Rev. Cindy Maddox
February 6, 2022

Luke 15:11b-32

The Prodigal Son is one of the most famous parables in the Bible.
My favorite preacher says that

“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 [a stuffed animal], it can lose its eyes, its whiskers, and a lot of its stuffing,
until it conforms to the arms of whoever picks it up.

After a while, you hardly have to hold it anymore.

You can just sling it over your wrist,
with the head on one side and the body on the other,
trusting it to stay put while you go about your business.

That’s how you know you don’t have a live parable anymore,
capable of leaping from your arms

and leading you out to where you did not mean to go.

Instead, you have a domestic pet, as captive to you
as you are to your culture.”¹

So for this Sunday and the next two weeks Pastor Lauren and I
will attempt to unchain this domestic pet of a parable
by focusing each week on a different character in the story.

We hope this will help us see it more clearly
because it is a scandalous story.

The action begins with the younger son saying,

“Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.”

We aren’t told why he made this request.

Maybe he was just greedy.

Maybe he was impatient for what would one day be his.

Maybe he didn’t get along with his father

and he wanted to get as far away as he could from the old man.

Maybe he was jealous because he wasn’t and never would be
the honored firstborn son.

The firstborn son got special treatment and the first of everything.

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. “The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family.”

He even got a double share of the inheritance.
 Maybe the unfairness of this arrangement gnawed at him
 until he said, "Heck with it, I'll take my share now."
 But getting "his share" was not a simple request in an agrarian society.
 Their livelihood came from the land,
 and in many cases, the land was all they had.
 The land had been held in trust for them by generations,
 and would be held in trust for generations to come.
 It was their livelihood, their legacy, and their gift from God.
 For a son to ask for his portion of the land in order to sell it
 meant that he was rejecting everything his family had to give him.
 He was decreasing not only the present holdings of his family
 but their future income as well.

Even more significantly, property was not given before the patriarch's death.
 So he was saying, in essence, that he couldn't wait for his father to die.
 Rev. Leonard Sweet says that the whole request
 "was an offensive, slap-in-the-face, 'I-wish-you-were-dead' disregard
 of all that was accepted, expected, and respected.
 He was supposed to stay on the family property, raise his own family,
 and help bring in the crops and 'run the family business.'
 He was supposed to honor his father through his life and work.
 The youngest son's demand for an 'early retirement'
 from any family commitment or obligation
 was the equivalent of him robbing the family safe-deposit box
 and taking off over the horizon."²

Then, as you know, he took his inheritance, his family's legacy,
 and wasted it on parties and women and who knows what else.
 And when the money ran out, his friends ran away.
 When a famine came upon the land, he had to hire himself out to a farmer,
 who put him to work feeding the pigs.
 As a Jew, he couldn't touch the skin of a pig without being made unclean, unholy.
 Of course, that ship had already sailed.
 He already was far outside the realm of what it meant to be a good Jew.
 His life was already an abomination.

² Sweet, Leonard. "Are You Part of the Scandal?" <https://preachitteachit.org/articles/detail/are-you-part-of-the-scandal/>

And then came his decision to go home.

I wish I could say I knew he was remorseful, but the story doesn't really tell us.

It seems as likely that he returned because of an empty belly
as because of a repentant heart.

He did not say, "I've been a jerk and I need to go ask for my father's forgiveness."

He said, "My father's hired hands have it better than I do."

And then he practiced his speech.

But there is one line that makes me curious, that makes me think it was real.

Many translations and paraphrases read,

"When he came to his senses," he realized his father's hired hands
were better off than he was.

But the New Revised Standard Version says "When he came to himself,"
he realized this.

I'm told that the literal translation from the Greek is "into self yet coming,"
so "he came to himself" is probably the accurate translation.

Freedictionary.com tells me that the idiom means

"to begin acting and thinking like one's normal self."

But what is one's normal self?

Does it mean his usual self?

You know the famous quote:

"When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time."

Well, the younger son showed us who he was.

He showed us that he was selfish, uncaring,
without compassion for his father,

without concern for his ancestors or descendants.

His own desires were more important to him than anyone or anything else.

We have no reason to believe that wasn't his normal, usual self.

But I think there's a difference between one's normal or usual self,
and one's true self.

For example, I could appear to be caring and compassionate
and underneath, I could be judgmental and catty.

Is the judgmental, catty part of me my true self? I don't think so.

I think that's my wounded self.

I think that's the place where fear takes root,
where wounds fester,

where insecurities turn to shame.

Our true self is our best self, beneath all that makes us hurt others and ourselves.

The problem is, there is so much that pulls us away from our true selves.

Like the younger brother,

we might be pulled away by a bad case of the not-enoughs.

My personal theory is that most people,

no matter how much money they make,

always think they need about 20% more to be comfortable.

Or maybe we're far too mature and enlightened to be pulled away by greed.

Maybe we're pulled away from our best self by jealousy . . .

not of someone's car or house

but their influence, their power;

or their promotion or position

or publications or tenure.

Or maybe we are pulled away by the lure of forbidden pleasure . . .

the affair, the escape from reality if only on our computers late at night.

Or maybe our motives aren't bad—maybe we just feel limited by our life

and we want something with more freedom,

but in the process we give up everything that really matters.

Or maybe it's none of these things.

Maybe we just lost our joy somewhere along the way.

Maybe we lost hope and don't know how to get it back.

Maybe we resisted and persisted

but none of it seems to have made a difference

and raising our voices feels like yelling into the wind.

Or maybe you don't even know—or have forgotten—who your true self is.

You've forgotten who you were before the pain,

before the loss,

before the stress of pandemic parenting,

before your own distant child broke your heart.

The scripture says the younger son was “into self yet coming.”

Coming to yourself is not usually an instantaneous event.

It's not usually a single epiphany, but a slow dawning . . .

which makes me wonder about his journey home.

What was that journey like?

Did he start . . . and then stop, and question?

He didn't know what would be waiting for him back home.

His father would be furious and there would be hell to pay.

Punishment or pigs?

Did he get an hour down the road, then stop?

His self-righteous brother would love to rub his nose in his failure.

Scorn or swine?

Did he stop for the night and think about stopping for good?

The whole town would be talking.

Humiliation or starvation?

Did he ever turn back?

Did his fear of the future ever get stronger than his shame of the past?

How long did it take for him to truly come to himself,

his core self, his best self?

Did it happen in the pig sty?

Did it happen on the road?

Or did it happen fully only when he felt his father's arms around him?

He was "into self yet coming."

We also are "into self yet coming," meaning that we're not all there yet.

We're on the road. We're on the road of discovery.

So I invite you to think about it.

I invite you to take ten minutes sometime today to sit down and make a list.

What are some characteristics that define your true self?

Who are you at your core?

Are you that person now, at least most of the time? some of the time?

If not, how long has it been?

The journey home is a journey of coming to ourselves.

It may not be an easy journey, but the journey leads to love.

The journey leads to forgiveness.

The journey leads to a celebration that we ourselves have been found.

God of the hungry

God of the sick

God of the prodigal

How does the creature say Care

How does the creature say Life

God of the ages

God near at hand

God of the loving heart

How do your children say Joy

How do your children say Home.