

June 14, 2015
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Desperate Desiring

Luke 15:1,2, 11-24
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them.

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’

And they began to celebrate.

I believe that all people are born with an inward desire for God. It only makes sense that we are attracted, somehow, to the One who made us, and the One to whom we will all return.

There are many ways this thesis has been stated. Perhaps most famously, from St. Augustine’s “Confessions,” is the single sentence: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” (It is one of the most quotable quotes of Christendom.)

It seems to me that a great deal of our living has to do with the restlessness that we have, bred in us, as we live toward our complete

reunion with God; and what we do with that, for good or for ill, for ourselves and others.

Today is step two of the Twelve Steps of Recovery, the recognition of the longing and deep desire built into us, and the act of 'our coming to belief' in a power greater than ourselves that can restore us. Step two follows step one: which was our recognition of our powerlessness, confessing our inability to manage EVERYTHING in life, including sobriety, but also accidents, disease, and the unpredictabilities of life; you name it.

Coming to a belief in a power greater than ourselves, according to Richard Rohr, is a trickier thing than simply reciting the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed. In his book, "Breathing Underwater", Rohr doesn't recount episodes of insobriety, as you can read dozens of in the A.A. 'Big Book', but rather he shares how Jesus made this same point in various settings and stories. 'Coming to oneself' involves the whole self, body, mind and spirit, in ways deeper and more complete than we might be ready to handle... and surely in ways that we in a traditional worship setting do not fully engage in, (for many reasons- and a topic for another day...)

Significantly, Rohr tells us- our coming to belief in a Greater Power is not about a singular leap of faith, regardless of how high or deep or far that might be. Rather than a leap, this is a life-long journey he's talking about. We're still at the beginning of the 12 Steps, so the realization, confession and admission that is we make is one we will need to do over

and over again; once is never enough. And going a step deeper, even at this early point, is the realization that it is not so much we ourselves on our own who need to make the journey- like a solitary traveler trudging into the wilderness, but even as we begin to make our first movement toward wholeness, the One who is Greater has already made a move toward us.

It's a lesson we all need to learn and experience, over and over again.

'Coming to oneself', involves, as Rohr puts it 'keeping spaces open in us'- mind, heart and body. It can be about emptying the mind and filling the heart; or it can be about pairing 'heart space' with 'body space', for example, through liturgical dance, fasting or performing music. In many and varied ways, realizing our deep and essential need for God is more than a one-dimensional process. It is visceral, mental, and heartfelt. And as so many spiritual truths, it can be best described, exemplified, in a story, maybe the best known of the Bible.

But first a little word about this parable and what Jesus was trying to get at with it. Patriarchs were not known to bankrupt themselves with massive gifts to their sons. This is 'an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.' Although on one level this is a story about family relationships, it is not meant to be a social commentary. The father represents the self-giving Ultimate Reality of God and the two sons represent the two predicaments in which people find themselves.

The younger son will be lost in sin and the older son will be lost in self-righteousness.

Both are lost and have the mindsets to prove it. It is these mindsets that the Father will need to work with, along with their physical and emotional selves, too.

It doesn't take us but a moment to shift our focus to the sad state of the prodigal son. Midway through his hoped-for exploit in adventurous living, out of money and desperate, the text tells us, "No one gave him anything." Was that a surprise to this younger son?

Was this the first time in his life that he saw how hard the world could be? He comes up with the novel idea of getting a job, but he can't find good work. So he takes a job feeding the pigs of a Gentile. What is a Jewish boy doing slopping the hogs? Medieval rabbis claimed this was not only against the Law of Moses, but it was also a curse. So the prodigal's dream of creating his own new life is turned into a curse.

At this point in the story, this boy is no longer recognizable, least of all to himself. It was a pretty bad scene... And here marks the critical turning point in the story. 'When he came to himself'... the phrase in and of itself doesn't signify repentance, sackcloth and ashes... the idea is more of 'coming to one's senses,' more profound than palm to forehead; more like a feeling down deep in the gut, a sinking heart, and turning around to begin the long walk back home. [Ever experience anything like that? I DONE WRONG...]

Was it the surfacing of the deep desire he had for union with his father and family that made him turn around, or was it sheer survival? Who knows.

In Philip Yancy's commentary on this story- an evangelical, pastoral scholar, he says, "Apparently, it matters little to God whether we begin our return out of desperation or out of longing." What is common to both motivations is our desire to return. This is only natural; built into the nature of the universe.

The astrophysicist Brian Swimme writes that 'desire permeates the macrostructure of the universe. He writes of 'the allurements of the atoms of nature', in the Hubble Space Telescope's photographs of the Eagle Nebula, where new stars are continually being born. 'Massive clouds of hydrogen atoms come rushing together in gravitational attraction. In the process, they are stripped of electrons, fusing to form helium ions as they release energy, proclaiming the glory of their union.' Making a quantum literary shift, he then compares this interstellar quality of attraction to the same allurements that excites lovers chasing each other through the night, or that pulls a parent out of bed in the middle of the night to comfort a sick child for the third time." Desire for wholeness is a building block of the universe.

In the second century, the Early Church Father Irenaeus claimed that the Holy Spirit and the Son, Jesus Christ, are the two outstretched arms of the God the Father. God uses both of them to pull us into his heart.

So the two opposing forces in life, (or maybe they are complimentary?)- are restlessness and desire.

Think about how where your restlessness has led you in your life; and what lessons you learned along the way...

-Craig Barnes says that nothing is more dangerous to the soul than to be a successful prodigal. Had that young man lived carefully and profitably in the distant country, he never would have made it back to the Father's arms. Remember, the point of the parable is to get into those arms.-

Now, think about where your expressions of desire have led you: and to who whom you have been led.

_When the prodigal finally comes to himself, we get a huge clue to discover the meaning of life.

He began to remember who he really was, acknowledges his deep desire, and also remembers his father's house; where he came from. The Father's house; that starting point, is not in Baltimore, New York, Virginia, or China. It has nothing to do with where you grew up and everything to do with your Father in heaven, the Creator of all, the one who establishes your true identity.

At the core of that identity is not a younger brother or sister trying to make good, or a rich kid trying not to blow it all. At the core of your identity is not a successful, powerful, or popular person, nor is it a person who is hurt, struggling or despairing. At the core of your identity is heaven's proclamation that you are a beloved child of God. That is who you are.

When it comes to the grace of the Father, to the final reunion, there is no deal to be made. There is just grace. Of course, we do not deserve

grace, but that is why it is called grace. It simply flows out of the heart of God from the depths of the universe.

A lot of contemporary spirituality is about our search for God. But even more important is a deep and sure awareness that, since we are all God's children, created in God's image; that our restlessness is part of God's own movement in us, drawing us inexorably closer to God.

If, as Richard Rohr quotes to us, "God comes to us disguised as our life," then even in our waywardness and restless wanderings, we can be sure that we will find God, especially where we least expect it; and that is good news; in Jesus' name. Amen