

## Re-Ordering Things

Sermon 66 | Greystone Baptist Church | July 19, 2020

Luke 15: 11-32

A man had two sons, or so the story goes. You know the one I'm talking about. The younger son asks for his inheritance and he squanders it all in just a short amount of time. The older son stays home and lives his life on the straight and narrow, obeying all the rules. When the wayward son returns home everyone, especially the father, seems to have forgotten his sins - the offense of leaving, the poor decisions he made, the absolute irresponsibility. Well, when I say *everyone* seems to have forgotten, I suppose I should say *everyone except* the older brother. He is having trouble making room in his heart for this kind of unconditional welcome.

For good reason, this timeless tale is one of the best-known stories from the Bible. It speaks to the core of who we are as human beings trying our best to figure out the ways of the world and the calling of God on our lives to live righteously and faithfully. It speaks to the heart of our experiences in families of origin and in our earliest relationships. Who among us does not relate to one of those brothers?

Did we have a little wild streak? A thirst for adventure that led us astray for a season of our lives? Have we made mistakes or messed things up a bit? Are there things in our past of which we are ashamed?

Or, maybe we identify more with the brother who stayed home. Have we kept all things under control... following the rules, making wise decisions, working hard and sticking to the plan to make sure that when famine comes – as it often does – we are prepared for the worst possible scenario?

Perhaps age, time, and a little good fortune have given us a dose of understanding and solidarity with the loving parent forced to mediate between two sons. It is an impossible job, to create understanding where there is no desire to understand. To insist upon grace where there is no capacity for forgiveness. ...To share in the joy of re-building and restoring things to a new order that includes both brothers... when the callouses have already closed up the hearts of the self-righteous one who stayed home and colored within the lines (so to speak).

There's a little something for everyone in this story. A character with whom to identify, and perhaps commiserate.

For that reason pastors, theologians, poets, songwriters, and artists have examined and interpreted this story – each shedding light on a new piece, offering a different angle, and a new opportunity for transformation.

One of the most famous renderings of the story hangs in the St. Petersburg Hermitage Museum. It is a beautiful piece by the Dutch painter known as Rembrandt. While this particular painting was completed near the end of his life, Rembrandt spent decades

wrestling with the biblical text, sketching and drawing different characters and scenes from the story – at times identifying with the younger son, other times with the elder. His fascination with the two characters finally led him to creating a masterpiece that some of his biographers would eventually call the apex of his spiritual homecoming.

Defined by the light in the painting, onlookers can see that the three men play important roles in the story. Each one defined by their relationship with one another.

Yale theologian, Miroslav Volf, contends that the familial relationships constitute the very identity of the father and the sons, and paying attention to those evolving family dynamics is the key to our interpretation and application of this parable for our own lives.

In the beginning of the reading, Luke introduces us to a man with two sons. Each defined by right relationship with one another, until the younger son decides to set out on his own. Not only does he leave the family home, but he asks for his inheritance as a way of funding his adventure. By this request, he severs the relationship that he had with his father implying that he no longer needs and values the physical and relational shelter that his father provides. Rather, he wants to go out on his own. Some say that in asking for the inheritance the younger son was basically telling his father that he wished he was dead.

The son chose independence over connection, individuality over family and in-so-doing he dismantled the relational identity of his entire family system. No longer was the man a father of two sons, but a father of one. No longer was the older son a brother to the younger. No longer was the younger son a brother or a son at all. Just a man alone, trying to find himself out in the world.

In a moment of desperation Luke tells us that he finally awakens to his loneliness and realizes that even his father's workers have it better than he does, for they are in relationship with someone beyond themselves. Having broken the familial tie of son-ship, the boy cannot imagine full reconciliation, so he decides to ask for something different. He returns home and begs to be hired as a worker on his father's land, a second class citizen for the rest of his life, marked by the sins of his past – none more severe than the severed relationship which changed him from *son* to *worker* and from *younger brother* to *hired hand*.

The oldest son, the one who stayed, certainly understands that everything changed when his brother left. His brother has broken the family covenant, he's asked to be removed from the system, he has left the household and broken ties. He is as good as dead to the family now. And we all know, there's no coming back from that.

As the story goes, the older brother's heart is hardened after the departure of his brother. Perhaps he is bitter about bearing the full responsibility of the household while his brother is living large, thinking only of himself. Perhaps he is jealous of the fun he assumes his brother is having, irresponsibly throwing money around and chasing after whims, neither working hard or planning ahead. Or perhaps he is simply grieving the loss of his brother,

building up an emotional wall to protect himself from ever having to feel the pain of death again.

Within the framework of the ancient household order, the younger son is gone. He's as good as dead. No longer a brother to the one who stayed home. No longer a son to the one who handed over the inheritance.

You can see the pain on the older brother's face in Rembrandt's piece.

Dutch priest and popular spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen writes about his experience in the Hermitage Museum after a long fascination with Rembrandt's masterpiece. He was excited and anxious. Excited to see the painting in person, to observe the strokes from the brush, to gaze upon the fatherly hands as they laid rest on the back of the son who had returned home, to take in the look of callousness from the older son, recognizing nothing was as he had imagined it to be.

At the time of his trip to St. Petersburg, Nouwen was in a time of spiritual discernment, he had resigned his professorship at Harvard and was transitioning to life in an intentional community. He'd always felt drawn to the painting but wondered if seeing it in person would provide some spiritual clarity about his soon-to-be homecoming. He wondered if Rembrandt might be offering him a traveling companion in his depiction of one of the sons.

Anxious that he might not have enough time to truly see and experience the painting, Nouwen connected with a friend of a friend, named Alexei, who promised he could get him access to the painting, away from the casual crowds of tourists who might not be on the same kind of spiritual journey. The next Saturday, Nouwen arrived at the museum and phoned Alexei who quickly met him and escorted him to the painting he had travelled so far to see. Amazed by the size of the piece, the vibrancy of the colors, the dance of the sunlight across the canvas, Nouwen looked at the painting and felt that he was at home.

As tourist groups came and went, Nouwen remained seated on one of the red velvet chairs stationed in front of the artwork. He looked on for hours, captivated by the embrace of the father, the revival of the son who was once as good as dead, the son who had broken the bounds of sonship claiming he would no longer be bound to the familial relationship. This was a moment not only of reconciliation. The once-dead son was being born again.

After several hours with the painting, the guard and cleaning lady informed Nouwen that the museum was closing, it was time for him to leave. Four days later, Nouwen returned to the painting and noticed that the early morning sunlight produced a glare on the canvas that made it uncomfortable to look. So he moved one of the red velvet chairs so that he could once again look at the painting without hurting his eyes. The guard quickly noticed and was very upset that Nouwen had moved the chair from its original position and she ordered him, "with an outpouring of Russian words and universal gestures," to put it

back.<sup>1</sup> Nouwen tried to explain himself but the guard was having none of it, so he put the chair back where it belonged and then he sat himself down on the floor. Moments later the guard came over and motioned for him to go and sit on the radiator below the window, thinking that might allow for a decent view. But it wasn't long before a tour guide passed through and insisted that he could not sit on the radiator, but must take his place in one of the red velvet chairs. This, of course, infuriated the guard who marched over to the tour guide, uttered some Russian words, and refocused her attention to the large group for whom she was responsible.

Soon after their encounter, Alexei returned to check on Nouwen. The guard immediately approached him and explained everything that had unfolded. After observing their long conversation, Alexei walked out of the room, leaving Nouwen feeling guilty for having caused such a disturbance and wondering if he would ever see Alexei again.

After ten agonizing minutes - which must have seemed like forever - Alexei re-emerged, bringing with him a huge red, velvet chair and placing it on the floor right in front of the painting, beckoning for Nouwen to come and take his seat.

Nouwen, Alexei, and the guard looked at one another and at the same time, all three smiled.

Nouwen stayed a while longer, seated comfortably in the red chair pulled from an unknown room or closet, and placed especially for him. As he left, he passed by the guard hoping to thank him for "putting up with him for so long..." Nouwen says that, "when [he] looked into his eyes under the large Russian cap, [he] saw a man like [himself]: afraid, but with a great desire to be forgiven."<sup>2</sup>

There's a bit of irony in the fact that Nouwen found himself in his own prodigal son experience even as he went to gaze upon Rembrandt's masterpiece depicting the same story.

Nouwen broke the rules, he stepped outside the order that the museum required, moving a chair, sitting on the floor, and trying to make things work from his unique experience. But the guard's role was to uphold the order of things, to ensure that nobody stepped out of line, or broke the rules, inviting chaos and disruption. Neither one could imagine a new order that Alexei ushered in, through a simple act of kindness, understanding, and hospitality.

Like the father in Luke's parable, Alexei's understanding of the order of things was transformed as he took it upon himself to create a new order. In this new order, there was no shortage of red velvet chairs just as there is no limit to the father's welcome. There is no final exclusion, due to poor choices, bad strokes of luck, or even a healthy dose of

---

<sup>1</sup> 9

<sup>2</sup> 11 – pronouns changed for grammatical context

foolishness. There is, however, an eternal embrace that remembers the relationship that once existed, and in this parental embrace, there is a necessary release because the old order of things has grown tired. Meaning, the father of the prodigal has to let go of the old order, wherein a son cannot claim his inheritance early and still return home as a son. The old order of things would insist that the only welcome return would be one that reclassified the younger son as a servant to the family. But allowing the Spirit of God to re-order the old social norms and household relationships opened up a new reality in which there was grace enough for both sons to come and sit at the family table. Not because of what they had done - whether they'd stayed or strayed - but because of who they were: children of their Father.

Both children, like each of us, desperately needed the welcoming and loving embrace of their father. And both children, like each of us, needs to be met with the healing and forgiveness only Christ can offer when we are willing to re-order our lives in such a way that nothing else matters. With this kind of re-orientation we can listen to the pain of our sisters and brothers who cry out from the streets. We can make room for the dissonance their stories have with ours. We can weep with those who are hurting, we can laugh with those who are joyful, and we can rest assured that no matter who we are, no matter where we've come from, and no matter what we've done... there's always one more red velvet chair being pulled out of God knows where and inviting us to sit, once again, at the family table.