

“TURNING, TURNING WE COME ROUND RIGHT”

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If this parable reveals one thing, it is we steer clear of sin and choose right not out of the fear of reprisal or the looming threat of punishment. No, we forsake wrong and embrace the good as we learn to trust how God loves us by loving ourselves the same way; as we also learn to trust and desire the things God desires for us.

We imagine we want too much and will not be satisfied with little. That is why we rebel against God, the good, and what we know is right, running off to far places. C.S. Lewis writes, just the opposite is true. The problem isn't that our desires are too strong. Rather our desires are too weak. We are too easily pleased by little distractions--trifles like dollars, flings, power, and status. Before eternity, they are mere shiny objects, temporarily pleasing to the eye maybe, but finally empty. Instead God would give us incredible riches, like honest relationship, profound belonging and true intimacy. But we've not yet learned to want the really good stuff.

It's like God offers us Argentina's best steaks and we want cotton candy; God offers us a Domaine Tempier from Provence but we prefer Ripple. This parable is a story laboratory shedding new light on these all-too-human, all-too-real dynamics. The parable bowls us over depicting God's massive joy as his reign dawns anew. Humans don't belong in pigsties. We aren't pigs. We are beloved daughters and sons of the true and living God, worthy of his costly love. We belong close to God.

In the short hymn we just sang, it speaks of turning, turning, to come round right. Isn't that how things eventually come out right, when they do, by turning, turning into directions where God's waiting for us, expecting us, hoping we'll come back? Let me describe two turnings in the parable, how they show the way back to God.

The first turning is within the prodigal son. In v. 17 we read that, "he came to himself." Having survived adolescence ourselves, and raised children also, many of us, we are familiar with the real, conflicting tensions roiling within young hearts. We don't know what caused the young son to push away the father, to reject life on their farm, to collect what he could, and then to launch out, isolated and alone.

Maybe it was about burden of expectations imposed upon him that he keenly felt and could never live up to. Maybe it was hypocrisy he perceived in his rich home. And how that pointed to painful disparities in the establishment they represented. Maybe it felt like all the others in his home knew who they were and what they wanted but the son didn't. He couldn't put on what they put on. It felt inauthentic. All I know is this. Even if our adult lives are well-ordered with clear life directions, we'd better listen closely to our young, as they can sense things we no longer sense. For whatever reason, life on his dad's credit card didn't last long or go far.

And the young son hadn't thought that far ahead, hadn't done the contingency planning, and hadn't considered how few his options might be in that moment. In part, that is what it means to be young, lacking experience to see down the road.

He didn't know how low he could sink. But there he was, a Jew looking after and feeding a large flock of swine. And the owners of that hog farm cared more about the filthy pigs than about him. We'd have to be Jewish to know how low that is. In Judea, around Jerusalem--where he was raised--even to smell ribs smoking or bacon sizzling was blasphemy. Some scholars wonder if that young son was running a large cache of bootleg hogs, smuggled across the Sea of Galilee, the way hootch secretly flowed across the Detroit River from Windsor during Prohibition. Even good Jews might flirt with a little sausage, now and again. What did it hurt? We know as soon as any substance is forbidden people become obsessed with it.

It is hard for us imagine what an excruciatingly painful contradiction it was for that young lad to live. Try this, imagine an Amish boy taught his entire life to love his neighbor, even to love his enemies, suddenly to find himself as a sniper in Iraq. That, friends, was the young son's cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dissonance.

When you're tempted, or when you do wrong, do you ever hear a voice inside of you? A small, pleading, insistent voice: "This isn't who I am. This is not what I believe. This just isn't me. It must stop." That voice is your conscience, the voice of loved ones who formed you, rooting for your best possible life, despite your doubt. The parable's first turning, when the son comes to his senses, was this internal eruption, small at first, but eventually overwhelming him, sending him back home.

I urge your sensitivity to that voice within you. Don't ignore it. Don't neglect it. Don't push it down like it's nothing. It's something. It's your Christian formation and identity--your spiritual integrity, wholeness and sanity--that are at stake here.

The second turning was within the father. In 1929 ballet choreographer George Balanchine staged his version of the Prodigal Son to Sergei Prokofiev's music. Check it out on YouTube. Balanchine, of course, was a master choreographer. But he wasn't much of a Bible reader or lay theologian. The reason I say that is because Balanchine had the son grovel as the father austere loomed over him.

That is not what Jesus said. Jesus said the father spied his son at a far distance, perhaps through a window. I wonder how often the dad glanced out that window waiting for him. Countless times a day? Likely a lot more than we wanted to, only to see no one, to take a deep breath, and tell himself, he must be more patient. Jesus said as the father saw his son, he ran toward him. He sprinted. He dashed.

Every morning I see men run along the Post Rd outside my parsonage window. Nowadays, running is cool, a sign of vim, vigor, and vitality. Back in Jesus' day, grown men *never* ran, especially any respected men. It showed a lack of dignity.

Oh, as that father waited, silently fuming at the sheer ingratitude of his youngest, I am certain he toyed with the idea of playing this scene like Balanchine wrote it. I am sure more than once he felt tempted to lay back, only to give him a look like, “I told you so...Didn’t I say you’d come back with your tail between your legs?... Why won’t you listen to me when I try help you, to teach you things that matter?” He wanted to hold back and respond out of wounded pride, but couldn’t. Instead as soon as he spied him, he catapulted toward him in vulnerable love, like on the cover of your order of worship. He wrapped his arms around him and kissed him.

I like James C. Howell’s story about his eldest daughter in a church talent show. Just four years old, she sang, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” sitting cabaret-style on a piano that her father played in accompaniment. “With no bias,” Howell writes, “Judy Garland never sang it better.” At the last note, the audience erupted in applause. They took a bow, then hurried side-stage, where he scooped her up, twirled her around, hugged and kissed her, and told her, “Oh Sarah, I love you.”

A church member was standing there watching the pastor and daughter embrace. She said to Rev. Howell, “I wish my father had done that.” A bit slow to catch on, he said, “You wish your father had played the piano, with you singing?” “No,” she said. “I wish my father had loved me.” Clearly, people struggle with their fathers. We hear that all of the time. “My dad was never there for me.” Or, “when he was there, he just wasn’t there.” This goes on and on, long after we are grown, long after dad is buried and in the grave. So we look for substitutes--teachers, bosses, spouses, coaches, father figures—desperately seeking blessing and affirmation.

I like Howell’s story because I once did something similar with my eldest, Greta. Except as we played “Michael Row the Boat Ashore”--she on the piano, me on the guitar--we both sang softly, inaudibly. Except I missed a chord change, and we lost our place. It wasn’t quite like Howell’s story. But it could end just as well. My eldest and I have struggled in ways in recent years. I will see her in Colorado after Easter. We haven’t had dinner together for 6 years. So pray for us, will you?

Those are the first and second turns, the youngest son turning back to his father, and the father turning reflexively toward his son with sweet love and compassion. As if this parable isn’t brilliant enough, we never know if the older brother puts aside his grievance to turn back toward his dad and brother. We never know if he comes down to the lavish party the generous father throws for the wayward son.

Jesus left it unfinished because life is unfinished. Because we all have turns we need to make that we haven’t made. And for not very good reasons, we put off those turns, rationalizing why we are right, waiting for the other to turn toward us, guarding our cold lonely pride, afraid to take the lead. Jesus didn’t finish with that third turn because he wanted us to write the ending *with our lives*. For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. Now is Lent, the season of turning from darkness toward Easter light. Turn, turn, turn, everyone. Amen.