

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – March 31, 2019
“Endless Love and Righteous Anger”
Luke 15: 1-3, 11b - 32

As a child, he was a good student who tested well. But when he became an adolescent and young adult, things began to unravel. At first, the questionable behaviors were more mainstream. Cigarettes. Alcohol. Vaping. Marijuana. In time, though, his choices took a darker turn. I still remember hearing about the time when he barricaded himself in a bathroom on New Year’s Day and overdosed on pain pills. He nearly died. I’ve learned that over the last several years, he has wrecked more than one vehicle and has been arrested numerous times. It has been years since we last spoke. However, he does send the occasional text message. And in a recent exchange, he spoke openly with me about his use of methamphetamines.

Friends, I can’t even describe the feeling one has when a relative reveals this to you. For me, it was like an out of body experience. A punch to the gut. I know that you’ve heard this many times before, but no one expects this to happen. To watch in slow motion as a loved one destroys his life one self-inflicted wound at a time. It must be devastating for his parents.

Deciphering truth from lies is never easy when communicating with an addict. To hear him tell it, his life is on an upward trajectory. He insists that the illicit behavior is always a thing of the past. But I don't believe him. And neither do other members of our family who suspect that cocaine and heroin are a part of his life, as well. He's not yet 25, but our family has been grieving for years. And, on a practical level, I wonder how much more abuse his body can take. Should I receive a call one day with the news that he has died, I would be deeply saddened. But I would not be surprised.

In our Gospel lessons this morning, we hear one of the most profound and moving narratives in all of scripture. A young man asks for his inheritance up front. We are stunned when his father relents and grants the request. Property is sold and the bank hands over a stack of crisp, \$100 bills. The older and younger men stuff it in a bag. The father gives his son one last hug and tells him to take care of himself. The young man promises that he will. And then, with a wry smile, he sets off walking toward the kind of freedom that he has always imagined. No curfew. No chores. No homework. No supervision.

We are not expecting the best because we know that young men with large sacks of money rarely fare well. As the story unfolds, he doesn't invest it. He doesn't

enroll in a university. He doesn't start a business venture. Instead, he pursues a life of hedonism. The young man's quest is rather simple. He is searching for the next party. The next line of cocaine. The next young lady to impress with a candlelight dinner and a generous tip. And day after day, that sack of money gets a little bit smaller.

His so-called friends have gotten him drunk and have stolen from him when he wasn't looking. The young women at his side have enjoyed his resources, but they have little interest in him or what he has to say. Vendors overcharge him everywhere that he goes because they've pegged him as a sucker. They know that he can pay whatever they ask. He seems naïve and they assume that he won't ask many questions.

The passage tells us that in a distant land, the young man squanders his half of the inheritance in dissolute living. Meanwhile, we, the readers, are left to wonder how both the son – but especially the father – could be so foolish. By now, we know the rest of the story. Of how his life transforms from riches to rags. His clothes are tattered. His shoes are broken. And he smells so foul that no friends or acquaintances are left. Even the bag that once held his inheritance is gone. He parted with it days ago in exchange for his last, hot meal.

Starving and in abject poverty, he makes his way back home in the hope that his father will greet him, not as a son, but as a servant. The older man has not seen his son for years, and does not know if he is dead or alive. But he has long dreamed of this day. And when spots his son lumbering in the distance, he runs to meet him with arms wide open. They embrace, and both men begin to weep.

Soon, everything is put on hold as a welcoming party bursts on the scene. And yet, not all are rejoicing. The other son, the one who has been faithful to his father for years, looks on resentfully. His demeanor signals the depth of harm that the wayward son has perpetrated against this family. The anger of the faithful son is righteous and understandable.

You may recall that the apostle Paul once asked, rhetorically, “should we go on sinning in order that grace may abound?” He then answered his own question with the emphatic, “By no means!” And yet, if forgiveness is ever-present, as this parable suggests, then how is grace not cheapened in the process? Or, as Cameron Murchison asks, “How do we (and how did Jesus) embrace prodigals without

indirectly minimizing or even encouraging prodigal behavior that harms so many members of our communities?”¹

It is no secret that Jesus loved to tell parables, these odd stories which sought to explain God in unpredictable ways. Most of these lessons lack neat endings or immediately apparent points. As Will Willimon suggests, “it’s as if Jesus says that God is not met through generalities and abstractions; God is met in the stuff of daily life, in the tug and pull of the ordinary, at a party for a son who really deserves nothing but a stern rebuke.”² So when Jesus tells the story of prodigal son, or of the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep behind in order to find the one who is lost, we learn that God’s love is more enduring than we ever imagined.

There is a wayward young man in my family and, perhaps, there is one in yours, as well. Someone who is lost and broken and who desperately needs to come home. We do not know how the story ends because Jesus refuses to tell us. And Jesus refuses to tell us because this is a story that we finish ourselves. He simply asks us to journey with him on the way to the cross and trust that God will meet us there. May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Ed. Joel B. Green, *Connections: Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 2*. (John Knox Press, 2018), 88.

² Will Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource: Year C, Part 1*, (Abingdon Press, 2018), 211.