

Sermon for Sunday, July 16, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"THE PRODIGAL WHO STAYED HOME"

St. Luke 15:11-32

Text: "...But he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends.'" St. Luke 15:29

The scripture we read this morning is ordinarily called the parable of the prodigal son. Actually, that title is wrong in two respects. First, it is wrong because the story is actually about two prodigals, not one. The elder brother was just as prodigal even tho he stayed home. Second, the emphasis is not on the prodigal son at all. The real emphasis is on the father who is forgiving to both prodigals.

See how it works? To understand the parable you must look at it in its historical context. At the beginning of the 15th chapter to St. Luke--the chapter in which our scripture of the two sons is contained--we read these words, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him (and here is the first group). And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, 'This man received sinners and eats with them.'" (here is the second group) So, here are two groups of people gathered around Jesus. Look at that first group of tax collectors and sinners. They are the outcasts of Jewish society. There is a desperate need in their lives to be told that they are persons of worth, that God cares for them and that they can be forgiven. The parable of the prodigal who left home and wanted to return is told for them. The emphasis here is on the forgiving Father who welcomes their return, who forgives them who restores them to sonship. But also around Jesus are the Pharisees and scribes, the church goers, the people who belong to the First Presbyterian Synagogue of Jerusalem, the religious people of the city. They resent the fact that Jesus is associating with the riffraff of the city, that he is including the spiritual castoffs in the Kingdom of God. And they complain bitterly about it. It was to these people to whom Jesus told the parable about the prodigal who stayed home.

So, when Jesus talks to the two groups gathered around him, he talks about two kinds of prodigals. One goes away, another stays home--but both are prodigal. And the emphasis of the whole story is on the loving Father who forgives them both.

What kind of a prodigal are you? The Bible says that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Whoever you are, you are in need of a loving Father who forgives you. Maybe you are a prodigal who has left home. Maybe you have drifted away from the church, done things you are ashamed of and for which you are truly sorry. It may be you are here this morning because you have a desperate need in your life, a longing for a relationship to your heavenly father. Jesus says that God is waiting, eager with love and compassion to forgive you. Whatever you may have done in your journey to a far country, God is the waiting father who longs for you to turn to him.

But most of us here this morning are a different sort of prodigal. We are like the prodigal who stayed home. And do you know what the biggest sin of the prodigal who stayed home was? He didn't even realize he was a prodigal! There he was, out in the field, working hard, doing as he was supposed to do, and he never even knew he was prodigal.

Notice in the first place he was prodigal because he didn't want his father to love his brother. Whatever his father had to give, he wanted for himself. Now in all fairness, we need to see things from the side of the elder brother. Children who stay home and don't cause trouble are often taken for granted. Frequently, parents give the appearance of having more concern and more affection for the prodigal child who may be breaking their hearts. Yet, we know this was not the case here. How much the father loved the older boy! "Son," he said, "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

Have you ever felt like the elder brother? Most of us have. We have heard someone giving an exciting testimony of how they came to know Jesus after a life of sin and degradation. Everybody makes over him. Everybody talks about how great it is and how wonderful it is and the returned prodigal gets all of the attention. But what about those of us who never did all of those wild, wicked things? What about those of us who have lived a good, moral, upright life? Nobody makes over us! Our testimony just isn't dramatic enough! Down deep there is a feeling of resentment about the prodigal. When he tells about how wicked he was before he found God, down deep we wonder if he really isn't bragging instead of confessing.

Do you know someone who has found Jesus lately? Have they been excited about it, talked about it, to the point that you wonder if they are becoming a fanatic? "Who do they think they are," we say to ourselves, "Are they trying to tell me they have something I don't have? Are they trying to tell me they are better than I am? Why, I've been a member of this church for years and I'm just as good a Christian as they are--maybe better. This church is just getting too fanatical for me."

What is really wrong with us? Isn't it that down deep we really want to be first in the eyes of others or the eyes of God? If we are honest, isn't it that we want to be first with God? After all, we never did all that riotous living, and we deserve to be special. Do you find that in your heart you are sometimes prodigal because there is some brother or some sister who is so excited about coming home to Jesus that you resent them? You see, we don't have to leave home to be a prodigal.

Notice in the second place that the elder brother was a prodigal because he served the father without joy. In our text this morning he says, "Lo, these many years I have served you.." The Greek word translated "serve" is not the ordinary word. It is a word that in the Greek comes from the word "slave". In other words, he is saying, "I have worked like a slave for you." It means grudging service; unhappy service--it means the kind of service that never comes from a glad, grateful and joyous heart.

Do you ever serve the Lord that way? I know I do. Sometimes I do things because I have to or because they are expected of me. But there is no joy in it. Over in the 12th chapter of Hebrews the Bible speaks of Jesus and it says of him, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." Isn't that amazing? There is Jesus, with the cross and the shame and the joy! St. James tells us, "Count it all joy...when you meet various trials." (1:2) Do you count it joy? Neither do I! That's some joy I could do without. But do you realize we sound just like the elder brother, "You never killed me a fatted calf."

I remember reading once about a large family that was very poor. An aunt who lived with the family was a self-sacrificing sort and since the children didn't like the heel of the bread, she would always say in a self-pitying tone, "I'll eat the heel of the bread." She let everyone know what a sacrifice she was making. (Are you guilty of that?) She served without joy. On the other hand, the mother would say with gait in her voice, "O please let me have the other." She served her children with joy and it made all the difference in the world.

Are you serving the Lord with joy? I know a lady who reads her Bible daily, prays often, does many good deeds. But there is no joy in her life, no happy excitement about serving the Lord. It is like the little girl watching people leave church one Sunday morning. She turned to her mother and asked, "Mommie, who died?" Or

it is like the little boy who gets to go to a big church service with his father one Sunday. He saw a white flag with gold stars on it hanging in the sanctuary. "What is that flag with the stars for?" he asked his father, "That," said his Dad, "is for the men in our church who died in the service." The lad studied the flag thoughtfully for a moment and then he asked, "Did they die in the 9:30 or the 11:00 o'clock service?" I read once of a woman who had grown old and blind. She had two daughters and one week one of them would come and clean her house for her and the next week the other would come. Each cleaned the house as well as the other, but the mother said, "It's a blessing when Janie comes to clean. She whistles and sings and hums the whole time. I can tell she does it for love and not for duty." Are you ever like the other daughter--serving outwardly, but underneath is a seething resentment that eats away at your heart? This sort of bitterness came out in the elder brother. "You never did anything for me!" he says, "You never gave me a standing rib roast for my Weber Kettle so my friends and I could have a barbecue." And can't you see him out in the field working, yet all the time his heart is consumed with resentment. "Here I am out here working in the hot sun. Daddy doesn't appreciate me. Why doesn't he do something nice for me like give me a party for me and my friends." I'm like that sometimes--are you? I'm doing my job, but even though I have stayed at home I am still a prodigal because I'm serving without joy.

Notice in the third place that the elder brother may have stayed at home, but just the same he had a prodigal heart. Is your heart prodigal? The younger brother was prodigal in body. He left home, he went to a far country, and there he lived in sin until he was reduced to poverty and destitution. Yet, in spite of his prodigality, something of home was still in his heart. There was still something of his father in his heart. When he had sunk to the depths of human misery and suffering, there came into his heart the remembrance of something of home, of father, of love. It was then that he turned his steps homeward.

Let me add an aside to you parents at this point. Love is never wasted. It will break our hearts to see our children go out into the world and there sometimes become prodigal--prodigals who cause us grief and despair and sorrow and sometimes shame. Yet, I think we need to remember that the love we give to them is never wasted. Some day when they are caught in the depths of human misery and despair there will come into their hearts something of home and the love they knew there. In God's providence, it may be that that remembered love will draw them homeward again. No, love is wasted.

But if the younger brother was prodigal in body, the elder brother was prodigal in heart. Outwardly he may never have done evil, but in his heart he had and perhaps of the two he was the worst prodigal of all. He may have been out in the fields with his body, but his heart was somewhere else. Notice what he says about his brother. He said to father, "But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots..." Now, how did he know his brother had devoured his father's estate living with harlots? The fact is, he didn't. He merely projected in his heart what his brother was doing. And why? Because that is what he would have done. Yes, his body may have been at home, but his heart roamed the world doing deeds of sin and degradation.

Are you guilty of that? I must confess that sometimes I am. We condemn in others what we have in our own hearts. If we are suspicious of others and distrustful of them and their deeds and their motives, it is because too frequently those are the very things in our own hearts. We suspect others of doing what we would do in

similar circumstances. Yes, the elder brother had a prodigal heart.

The story of the prodigal son who left home was told for the sake of the tax collectors and sinners--for those who knew they were lost and desperately needed forgiveness and love. But the story of the elder brother--the prodigal who stayed at home--was told for church people like you and like me. It warns us that we can be prodigal too--we can be prodigal if we want God to love only us, prodigal if we serve grudgingly, without joy, prodigal if our hearts are filled with wickedness.

You see, the bottom line is this: we are all prodigals. Some of us are prodigals who leave home and need to come back; some of us are prodigals who stay at home. The Good News is that the father loves both prodigals. Whichever prodigal you are, God loves you.