

*Claude Rochon, March 6, 2016*

## **The Parable of the Prodigal Son**

“Turning over a new leaf”: doesn’t it seem like we are always trying to do that? Whether it New Year’s resolutions, or some reminder during the Church Year (Advent, Lent, etc.), or a particular meditation, or a significant life event? But how do we go about it? What can point us in the right direction as how to proceed? There are many ways, of course, but today I would like to mention one, which I call the narrative way.

You may have heard the statistic: about 40% of the Bible is narrative, i.e., comprised of stories. There is probably a good reason for that. While it is certainly possible to let our life be influenced by theological propositions (Proverbs, Sermon on the Mount, Paul’s epistles, etc.) or even poetry (Psalms), there is reason to believe that reading stories and assessing our lives in view of those stories is a pretty good way of helping us “turn over a new leaf”.

There is even a branch of psychology called “narrative psychology”, which helps trauma victims (for instance) reinterpret their own life story in such a way as to carry on living (and not just surviving) following a traumatic event. A French philosopher, Paul Ricœur, goes as far as saying that we should think of our own identity in narrative terms: our self-understanding is rooted in the stories that we tell ourselves and that we tell to others about ourselves.

I won’t go into the philosophical aspects of narrative today (collective sigh of relief), but what I will do is try to see how the story of the Prodigal Son can help us turn over a new leaf... or at least begin to do so... by pointing us in the right direction.

There are three main characters in this story. What can we learn about ourselves by examining each one in turn? Let’s start with the younger son.

### **The Younger Son**

#### ***Wishing your father dead***

First, he asks his father to give him his inheritance. In that first-century culture (and in many cultures still today), asking for your share of the inheritance was equivalent to wishing your father dead. Verse 11 even implies that not only is he asking for his share – which means that the father would still have a right to live off the proceeds as long as is alive – but also to dispose of it as he sees fit – an even greater offense. So, on the surface, this could be a legitimate desire to go away to “see the world”, but it is not: it is a rejection of home, family and community values.

Have you ever wished you could reject all that whenever it becomes too much of a burden?

#### ***Squandering his inheritance***

Then, he goes away and squanders all his inheritance in “dissolute living”. Somebody once described dependency as “seeking love where it cannot be found”: financial success, celebrity, power-seeking, social status, lavish consumption of goods, sexual gratification based on lust, etc. So leaving home may seem like seeking independence, but in the case of the prodigal son, he has fallen into dependencies

Can we identify with that? Seeking independence only to lock ourselves in a prison?

#### ***Going hungry***

Then, he hires himself out, and Jesus tells us that “*he would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; [but] no one gave him anything*” (v. 16). When he realized that nobody gave

him anything, not even food only fit for pigs, he understood that he was no longer considered a human being – he was dehumanized. He may have thought to himself: “I am useless. I am worthless. I am a nobody.”<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever felt this way? Especially after failing at something that you or others considered important?

### ***Going back home***

Finally he decides to go back home and to tell his father: “*I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands*” (v. 19). Sometimes, we are very conscious of our guilt and we know that we do not deserve the status of “son”. So it is with the Prodigal son. He does not expect to be re-established as a son, but only as a hired hand. It is inward-looking repentance. It is not repentance based on the infinite love of a compassionate God. He still sees his father (representing God for us) as a harsh and severe Father.

Is it our case? We *know* we are forgiven, yet we don’t really *feel* it. And it is understandable, because my human experience tells me that forgiveness depends in part on someone else’s willingness to forgive me rather than seek revenge. But I don’t know which it will be: forgiveness or revenge?

But not so with God: He is a God of grace!

Within the context of this parable, we could define grace as “knowing that I can always go back home because I know I will be accepted and loved unconditionally.” Philip Yancey also defines grace in an interesting way: “Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more [...] and grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.”<sup>2</sup>

### **The Elder Son**

Now the elder son: can we identify with him? For example, were we obedient when we were young – especially if we grew up in the Church?

In a family, the oldest sibling often wants to meet his parent’s expectations, to be regarded as respectful and obedient, to lead a respectable and orderly life - in other words, to become a model son... or daughter. Younger siblings are often (but not always) more care-free. And there is a cost to that. It may become a burden for the elder may become resentful, even envious of the younger ones. That’s what happens here:

<sup>28</sup>*Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.*  
<sup>29</sup>*But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”*

It is easy to see the sin of the younger son. He clearly has done wrong. But he has repented and we can sympathize with him. It is much harder for the older son to see his sin... After all, he has done everything right. He was obedient, faithful, and probably hardworking. Externally, he was flawless.

But the *joy* of his father reveals what was inside him: jealousy, anger, resentment, self-righteousness, bitterness. And it begs the question: what is more dangerous, spiritually, speaking: dissipation (younger son) or resentment (elder son)? It is hard for “resentful saints” to see their sin, “precisely because it is so closely wedded to the desire to be good and virtuous”<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, New York, Doubleday, 1994, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing about Grace?*, Grand Rapids (MI), Zondervan, 2003, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> H. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, p. 71.

So it can be much harder for us to sympathize with the elder son and thus to identify with him. One way to discern this: do we have joy? When somebody else's joy produces anger and resentment, maybe it's time to "turn over a new leaf". Because what I have to realize then is that God loves me unconditionally. And what I have to do is let Him love me unconditionally... and thus set me free to love my neighbour (and my brother) beyond the pathological need to please and to be accepted.

The story ends this way:

*<sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."*

What happened to the elder son? Did he relent and join the feast, like his father asked him? Did he reconcile with his younger brother? Did he choose to "celebrate and rejoice"? Or did he remain angry and resentful and just storm off? Jesus doesn't say – which is an invitation to his original audience (the Pharisees and the scribes) and us to choose. Will I turn over a new leaf or stay resentful?

## **The Father**

In the story of the prodigal son, we begin to see the baffling ways of God. The father rushes out to greet his returning child to forgive and demonstrate his love for him. Actually, the father comes out to meet both his sons. He is not torn between his two sons; he loves them both unconditionally. And his only wish is the same: to bring them home. And so it is with God.

Even at the beginning of the story, the father's love is so great that he accepts his younger son's request and allows him full freedom to leave the home. The story shows us that God wants his children free... free to love Him. He cannot force them to love Him. In the parable, the Father's only authority is that of compassion.... always hoping that his children will come back.

## ***Becoming the Father***

How can we identify with the father? After all, we are not God...

I like to see myself as the younger son, sometimes – especially when I am in need of forgiveness. But more often than I care to admit, I am the elder son. However, the real temptation is to remain like the prodigal and not grow up (spiritually). We all seek love and affection, appreciation and approval – which is OK. But as we mature spiritually, we are called to love without expecting anything in return, to be a father to those who need love and compassion – without asking questions, welcome those who are lost and in need of love, approval and compassion.

In other words... we are called to become the father.

Of course, as I said, in the story, the father represents God. But, as Jesus puts it in the Sermon on the Mount: "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Mt 5.48). As Henry Nouwen puts it:

The parable of the prodigal son is a story that speaks about a love that existed before any rejection was possible and that will still be there after all rejections have taken place. It is the first and everlasting love of a God who is Father as well as Mother. It is the fountain of all true human love, even the most limited. Jesus' whole life and preaching had only one aim: to reveal this inexhaustible, unlimited motherly and fatherly love of his God and to show the way so let that love guide every part of our daily lives.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> H. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, p. 108-109.

## Conclusion

So how can we turn over a new leaf? Or, at least, what can point us in the right direction?

First, read more Bible stories and try to identify with the characters – even (and maybe especially) the ones who we are not naturally drawn to.

From the younger son, I can learn...

- Make sure my quest for freedom does not lead me into “captivity” (dependencies).
- Realize that I am never out of God’s reach, God’s grace, God’s love. In other words, I can always go back home...no matter how far away I’ve strayed

From the elder son, I can...

- Realize that, at least sometimes, I think and act very much like the elder son. Does someone’s joy rob me of mine? Why?
- Let God love me unconditionally – without feeling that I have to please Him in order to be accepted by Him. As Yancey says, “grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more.” So I *want* to please Him, yes, but out of love, not in order to be loved.

From the father...

- Without ceasing to recognize my constant need for grace (like the younger son), try and become more like the father – the one who loves and accepts others unconditionally
- And finally, as Jesus invites us at the end of the story... enter the Father’s joy!