



## FATHER'S DAY

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, June 21, 2009**

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**Lection – Luke 15: 11-32** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 11) Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. (v. 12) The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. (v. 13) A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. (v. 14) When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. (v. 15) So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. (v. 16) He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. (v. 17) But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! (v. 18) I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; (v. 19) I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ (v. 20) So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. (v. 21) Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ (v. 22) But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him;

put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. (v. 23) And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; (v. 24) for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. (v. 25) Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. (v. 26) He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. (v. 27) He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ (v. 28) Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. (v. 29) 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. (v. 30) But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ (v. 31) Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. (v. 32) 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.’”

## **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Father’s Day is a day designed to celebrate men who have been blessed with the gift of fatherhood. Even though slavery, second class citizenship and social injustice have conspired to cripple many African American families and put black men in the category of “endangered,” good fathers are still highly regarded and respected in the African American community.

In black churches around the nation, there are commemorative celebrations and engaging and entertaining experiences that highlight the strengths and vitality of African American men. Many churches will have “Father and son Banquets” or “Daddy and Daughter Dinners and Dances” providing meaningful moments of bonding and sharing for fathers and their offspring. I have also been privileged to participate in “Real Men Cook” celebrations on Father’s Day, where black men demonstrate their culinary skills at large locations, and the community comes in this convivial setting to partake of various dishes all in support of good charitable causes.

In light of the “endangered” label that has been placed on African American men, many black churches use this day to pray collectively for black men who are in various negative contexts (prison, drugs, unemployed, etc.) and design a worship experience that is uplifting to brothers, in particular and black families, in general.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 15: 11-32**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

This is an interesting time to be an African American man and father. An African American father has been elected to give leadership to a nation with a legacy of emasculating black men socially and economically. President Barack Obama is a loving

husband and doting dad. His strength, charisma and cool have captured the imagination of the world in general and African Americans in particular.

Ironically, President Obama comes from a home broken by the absence and eventual death of his Kenyan father. In a nation with a tragic history of placing African Americans in categories in order to stigmatize, demonize and retard their advancement, black men in general, and black fathers in particular, have long been placed in one bundle with the labels irresponsible, pimps, womanizers and inept.

Barack Obama has endured stress and strain and overcome a broken family background to create a future with new possibilities. The father in our text, traditionally referred to as the parable of the “Prodigal Son,” chooses a future of new possibilities by which African Americans in general and black fathers in particular should be instructed and inspired.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The Pharisees and teachers of the Law have issues with the fact that Jesus does not fit into the “box” to which they believe he should conform. Jesus is fellowshiping with the fraternity of the friendless and forgotten. The love of our Lord for the lost and the least has made him “public enemy number one” to the custodians of religious protocol and power.

The religious leaders attack Jesus by using the tactic of guilt by association. They grumble that he eats with those who are despised and disreputable to polite society. Jesus responds to their indictment, which is really a confirmation of his messianic mission, by telling three stories with one message: God is passionately preoccupied with redeeming and restoring those who are lost. The text is set in a climate of hostility and condemnation. The popularity of Jesus is undeniable, his powerful ministry is making a difference among the marginalized, but the religious leaders don’t like the company he has chosen to keep around him. Their indicting commentary gives birth to three brilliant parables. He tells the story of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the **lost sons**.

The parable that has received the title “The Prodigal Son” (which I refer to as the story of the lost sons) is really the story of a loving and faithful father who brings healing love to his broken home. Jesus begins this story, the crown jewel of his parabolic teachings, by telling of the rebellious youngest son who thoughtlessly and selfishly treats his father as if he is dead by asking for his share of the inheritance though his father is still alive. The listening audience of Jesus’ day would be shocked at the temerity of this ungrateful child. He, through his disrespectful request, may as well be saying to his father, “You are dead to me.” Jesus has arrested the attention of the audience by jarring them emotionally at the outset of this story.

The father demonstrates an out-of-the-box love by agreeing to his sons’ outrageous request. The love of the father is strong enough to let the son have what he thinks he wants even if it hurts the father to do it. This rebellious boy now takes his 1/3 of the inheritance (the elder brother was due 2/3rds) and proceeds to liquidate his inheritance.

This is the final straw of disrespect. According to Craig Keener, “Jewish law did permit a father to determine which assets (especially land) would go to which sons before he died, but they could take possession only on the father’s death: the father was manager and received the land’s profits until then. Thus this son could know what would be his but could not legally sell his assets; but he does it anyway.” Surely this rascal of a son has crossed the line and has passed the point of no return in the minds of the appalled listeners.

The master storyteller continues by saying that the boy went to a “far country” and he soon ran out of funds, food and friends. He hit rock bottom. To make clear his rock bottom status, Jesus says that the boy hired himself out to work during a famine feeding pigs. This is the ultimate form of humiliation in a kosher culture.

However, when he hits rock bottom he receives a wake-up call. Jesus says, “He came to his senses.” The moment he made up his mind to break the relationship with his father, he lost his mind and was no longer conscious of whom he was and whose he was. The text now shifts, unbeknownst to the audience, who has concluded the boy has gotten what he deserved.

When he came to himself, awakened by his deteriorating and humiliating conditions, he concluded that being a servant in his father’s house was better than being what Dr. Gardner C. Taylor referred to as a “Prince in a Pig Pen.” He conjures up a confession and makes his way back home. This broken boy begins his rehearsed confession, only to be interrupted by his glad dad who sends for a robe, a ring, and shoes and tells the servants to prepare a “barbeque party,” because his son was lost but is now found; he was dead but has experienced a resurrection.

While the welcome home party was taking place, the older brother, making his way in from a long dutiful day of work, hears the commotion. He does not go in but asks one of the servants what is going on. When he finds out, he is enraged. His father evidently notices his older sons’ absence or hears his heated response to the servants’ explanation and comes to ask his older son to join the celebration. The older son recites the younger sons’ list of sins, as if he were an eyewitness, and then lifts up his own fidelity that has gone unrewarded by his father. The faithful father again has his heart broken by another son who does not get it.

However, he reaches out in patient love to his oldest son, too. The loving father reminds his bitter son that everything he has, his son has. The party thrown for the youngest son does not take anything away from what the father has for the oldest son. The father is celebrating the fact that a family that was broken is now whole, because the lost has been found and he who was dead is now alive.

## **Celebration**

The faithfulness of a father brought the possibility of healing to a broken home. The Gospel of grace has opened the door to a future that at one point appeared to be forever

closed. The son received far more than he hoped upon his return. The amazing grace of God sets the stage for healing broken people, restoring broken relationships and setting the stage for a future of new possibilities. On this Father's Day, may the liberating and lifting Gospel of Jesus Christ cause broken men to "come to their senses," fractured families to be healed and new possibilities to be experienced by all!

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include:

**Sights:** The young son gathering all he has to leave home; the son engaging in activities that squander his money; a famine in the far country; the young son feeding pigs; the young son hungering for the food of the pigs; the father running to embrace his son; the robe, sandals and ring that the young son receives upon his return home; the fatted calf cooked for the party; the young goat the older brother says he never received;

**Sounds:** The sounds of life in the far country; the sound of the pigs in the pigpen; the young son rehearsing what he will say when he returns home; the sound of music and dancing upon the return of the young son; the father pleading with the older brother to join the party being held for his younger brother; and

**Colors:** The numerous colors of the homes in the far country; the yellowish grain for the pigs; the brown sandals; the multi-colored robe for the son; the shining ring; the white goat; and the brown calf.

### **III. Additional Material for the Sermonic Moment**

- When the son returns from the far country it is of note that the father runs to greet him. My Religion Professor at Bishop College, Dr. John Mangrum, said that the crowd in the community had noticed the return of the rebellious rascal and gathered to stone him, appropriate punishment for this low life lad. However, when the father ran to his son and threw his arms around him and showered him with affection, the message to the judgmental, self-appointed punishers was, "You'll have to hit me with those stones, and I'm not guilty of anything but loving my son."
- When the loving father gives the son shoes, it is a mark of his full restoration as a son in the family, for slaves didn't wear shoes, only the children of the father. The ring was a symbol of authority. His past did not preclude him from being promoted even in the presence of those aware of his shortcomings and failure.
- Ironically, Jesus chooses to leave open and unconcluded the response of the elder brother to the fathers' invitation to join in the party of reconciliation and restoration. The religious leaders would have to provide the conclusion to the story with their response to the lost.

- In the powerful commentary True to Our Native Land, Dr. Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder insightfully reminds me of a moving episode from the television show Good Times. In the show, the Evans family struggled in an impoverished apartment complex in Chicago. However, they were a loving family that struggled with dignity. James was the strong and determined patriarch and Florida was the strong and loving matriarch. The children were Thelma, Michael and J. J.

J. J. fell in love, and caught up in the rapture of teenage passion he became engaged and decided to elope with his prom date. Both sets of parents disapproved but could not dissuade the determined couple. In their rush to leave the house, J. J. mistakenly took his sisters' purse instead of his fiancée's. His fiancée, Diana, was addicted to heroin, but J. J. did not know this. When they reached the hotel and Diana couldn't find her "medicine," because J. J. had inadvertently taken the wrong purse, she has a withdrawal meltdown. She flees the hotel.

J. J. is at rock bottom. His world has fallen apart, and he has disobeyed and turned his back on his parents. He calls home, and his parents tell him about Diana's "problem" and plead for him to come back home. J. J. had disrespected his parents, broken their hearts and he had hit rock bottom. However, he could not break the love of his parents. We may break Gods' heart, but we can never break Gods' love.

### **Quotations**

Dr. Gardner C. Taylor lifted my broken spirit in a sermon I was privileged to hear him preach when he profoundly proclaimed that no matter how far we have fallen, "God stoops and scoops" us back to God's self.

The late Dr. E. K. Bailey said, "We can never fall so low that we fall beyond the reach and grip of God's amazing grace."

### **Illustration**

A man came to our church with this moving testimony. He is a truck driver. His life had taken a wrong turn as he became addicted to crack cocaine. His family was destroyed by his addiction. One day, while driving south on Hampton Boulevard in Dallas near Interstate 20, tears filled his eyes as he drove and pondered his plight. To make matters worse, he noticed a siren and a police officer signaling for him to pull over. This is the last thing he needs, he says to himself, feeling his life is being flushed down a toilet toward a ruinous end. The police officer notices his tears and asks if he is all right. The truck driver is proud and says he will be. The police officer tells him, it's Sunday morning and he should go to church and hear from heaven. The truck driver says he would be glad to, but he's from out of town and doesn't know where to go. The officer tells him to go to Friendship-West, the church he belongs to. The truck driver asks for directions, and the directions began the change his life needed. The officer said, "Make a U-turn at the next light. Drive two blocks and turn right. When you turn right, look up and above the trees you will see a cross. Follow the cross and you'll be all right."

**Film/DVD Recommendation**

Field of Dreams is a powerful movie of a man whose broken relationship with his dead father haunts him. However, the spirit of his father comes to the stadium he builds by faith, and restoration and healing take place.