

“Coming Home To Yourself (and God)”

Luke 15:11-32

4/9/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

The prodigal son is probably the most popular of Jesus’ parables because the story line deals with a situation many people experience – a falling away from the values taught in one’s family of origins and the healing that takes place when one finds what is best for them. Jesus told the parable not because He wanted to talk about someone getting their act together but because some of the religious leaders resented the fact that they were not getting enough attention for being so religious. It would have been more appropriate for our modern Bible publishers to title the parable “The Grudging Elder Brother.”

Most of you were probably raised in a respectable protestant middle-to-upper middle class home. You probably grew up in a regular church-attending family. But when we try to imagine a modern-day prodigal, the image that comes to us is far removed from our personal or family experiences.

“This could never happen to me or anyone in our family!” we assure ourselves. And since most of us are surrounded by affluence, we tend to mentally retreat to our secure suburban Christian lives. We were taught to think that if we do well in school, marry an intelligent and fun person and aim at success in our careers, life will even out pretty much on its own.

I want to talk about some of the things in the parable that we don’t usually mention. I want to talk about the depression and feeling of lostness that the son experienced even though his parents probably gave him the best of upbringings. I want to take a look at the pain that the father probably was going through as his son seemingly disregarded all of the values he was given. And to do this, I am going to talk about a time in the life of someone I once knew who was searching for what is right for him. I am talking about this to encourage you to be true to yourself and search for what is right for you – no matter what the cost.



Andrew and his brother where both of their parents v father even being a minister. From birth, they were raised in the teachings of the Church, memorizing Bible verses and for doing so, they received those little ribbons in Sunday school. Andrew and his brother were so regular in church activities that it was unthinkable to be on a vacation and not go to a nearby church. Involvement in the church was a way of life. Andy became a Christian when he was ten.

Of course there were pressures from being in a minister’s family that placed unrealistic expectations on both Andy and his brother, but somewhere from junior high on into senior high, Andy began pulling away from what he understood to be Christianity. A lot of it can be explained as a healthy young adult’s attempt to establish his own separate identity. But as soon as he left home, after high school, he started in a direction that would seem to depart from the values he had previously held.

When Andy found himself in a Midwestern Christian college, he began listing all of the things he disliked about the fundamentalist Christianity of his youth. He despised the legalism and the relentless negative criticism of others who didn’t fit into that narrow expression of faith. He was disgusted with the smug attitudes that portrayed people with difficulties as having brought them on themselves because they were somehow “not right with God.” Andy would never forget the eighteen years of stuffy and cheerless worship services.

During the first few years of college Andy was discarding most of his past because he was dissatisfied with so much of his upbringing. He was casting aside the Christianity of his parents but not replacing that value system with anything else. When you are in the position of not listening to anyone except your peers

and when you have turned off all of the wisdom from those who have gone before, all that you have remaining is the rather limited input of your friends.

As Andrew rejected much of his past, he began to sense an emptiness within him. It was also a time when he was very self-centered. All he wanted to do was fun things with his friends. And in his rather self-centered mind-set, Andy managed to party so much that the administration kicked him and his friends out of the college.

Andy told me that he and his friends didn't think much of that because they were focused only on the present, on having a good time, ... totally blind to the aimlessness that lay ahead. He and his friends moved into an apartment and because they were bright college kids they quickly managed to get jobs.

Andy began working in a Chicago hospital as a transportation orderly. He learned that you can always make it and survive but still there seemed to be something missing in his life. He had been raised to believe that one should live with meaning and purpose but that purpose was beyond him.

The only thing that did not have a bit of emptiness in his life was their apartment. There was a continual current of people and inanimate objects in one form of decay or another. Looking at the living conditions, one would think that just passing through the place would be risking contracting a social disease. In the mornings, Andy would wade through the unknown people sleeping on the apartment floor and hope to find a clean cereal bowl and a vacant place at the breakfast table.

Andy ate cereal for two of his daily meals but despite his poor nutritional status, he felt like the words to the Billy Joel song which said: "we never knew life could be any finer." He and his friends were glad to be out on their own, living with only the rules and restrictions placed on them by their landlords. They went from one day to the next, doing whatever they felt like doing, more or less. They never got involved in the singles' bar scene because their apartment was the center of enough of that kind of action. Andy used people and people used him in a general 1960's life-style that could only be described as hedonistic and pleasure-seeking.

Unlike the character in the prodigal son parable, Andy intentionally looked into different religions and philosophies. He was seriously trying to pursue an alternative religion to the one with which he had become so disenchanted.



"Le Retour De L'Enfant
Prodigue Au Clichier"
Jean Louis Forain
(France: 1909)

He looked into one called "The virtue of selfishness" in which the author Ann Rand teaches that we should always do things for ourselves and no one else. For a while, Andy believed that any good that people do is ultimately done out of selfish motives. And this was very convincing at the time because the argument was not open to testing, ... because one can never prove another's motives one way or the other.

But Andy's friends believed that most people do good things out of good motives and in time, he came to that conclusion himself. Andy realized most people *are* good.

Andy next studied some of the Eastern philosophies in the evenings, doing some Zen meditation and trying to get in touch with the "ultimate wholeness" that was *supposed* to be within him. Meditation was calming for Andy but all he found was the endless entanglement of psychology and the complexity of introspection.

Andy continued to feel an inner restlessness, ... feeling an emptiness settling within him. He had really nothing in particular for which to live. He was just working, sleeping, eating and having as good a time as he could. And with his increasing use of recreational drugs he soon became possessed with, for lack of something else to call it, the "why not" mentality.

The "why not" mentality is simply believing: why not get involved in the next thing that a friend brings along? Why not take that substance to get high? Why not? There is no reason not to because everyone around him is doing it and it sure is fun. And the vacuum within him began to be filled with the despairing life-style that is only hinted at in the parable of the prodigal son. Andy would sometimes

wake up in the morning not knowing where he was nor the people in the room.

Meanwhile, the rest of Andrew's family was about a thousand miles away, wondering what on earth he was doing with himself, ... kicked out of college, ... living with who knows who in an apartment in urban Chicago. But for Andrew their thoughts and feelings were miles away because he was so tuned into himself, that all that mattered, even with his own future, was the next two hours and the next fun experience.

One day a young woman friend told him, with tears in her eyes, that she can not bear to see him tripped out on the floor like a vegetable ... with his mouth drooling as he stared at the wall, numbed by the drugs he was taking. Andy never had a bad acid trip, as did some of his friends and smoking marijuana was fun at the time. He *did* inhale.

What Andrew wouldn't know for over a year was that from the very first time you get high on any drug, ... until several months after you quit, ... the delicate balance of the chemistry of your brain is changed. From doing drugs, in your day-to-day functioning, you lose much of your natural good feelings and energy. He didn't know that just like when a stereo tape recorder is not cared for it loses all its high and low fidelity sounds, ... drug use knocks out the dynamic of your personality. He didn't know that drug use eliminates your stamina to cope with changes and stress. You lose most of your drive. So when you are feeling low, your low periods are longer and deeper.

A few of Andy's friends, who were excellent students before they did drugs, never finished college and years later were still having a difficult time trying to get their lives together. A friend of Andy's never made it back from his drug experimentation because his mental and emotional chemistry never recovered. He is institutionalized to this day.

There was a time when Andy wondered if he would ever again be able to read a book for more than thirty minutes because of the drugs' effects on his mental chemistry. Today Andy would tell you that using drugs is foolish and dangerous and the price of using drugs is unimaginable despair. So Andy was existing in about as stagnant and as despairing an

existence into which anyone could have worked him or herself. All Andy could see was himself. But down deep inside Andy felt that God was somewhere around but not totally gone.

One day Andy received a letter from a woman who happened to be an old friend of his parents. She had known his father because she had attended the same college. The letter said, "It's been a while since I've seen your parents and the other day I happened to meet your father on the street. I naturally asked him how you were doing, since I heard you were going to our alma mater. When I asked that, he turned away from me in the street and he couldn't speak. And he walked away from me weeping."

Think of the pain of the father in the parable of the prodigal son.

By this time Andy was in rather poor health from eating junk food and generally abusing his body. He had just recovered from a bout with mono but he was still holding down the hospital job in Chicago and he was making it, yet Andy still felt an emptiness within him.

His job as an orderly in the hospital was to transport patients around from their rooms to various X-ray therapies, radiation treatments or operations. As limited as his thinking was at the time and as self-absorbed as he was, Andy still had gotten to know several of the patients.

As he would take them along through the corridors they would talk to him of their children and grandchildren.

He became fond of some of the patients. They spoke to him of their work, their families, their hopes and their dreams. By spending time with so many of them, Andy came to look beyond himself and feel love for them.

One morning he received an order to deliver the body of a patient, up on the 18th floor, to the hospital morgue. When he arrived in the room he discovered it was a kind woman he had gotten to know rather well. Just the day before, she was telling him about her hopes for the coming summer. And as he wheeled that woman's body down the corridor and into a private elevator, their conversations of the past few weeks passed through his mind.

Life seemed so fragile and brief to him in those moments and Andy began to realize that with all of his many months of determining what wasn't working for his own life, he had never come to the point of settling on what he wanted to do with his life.

As Andy slid her corpse into the freezer door of the morgue, he searched within himself, wondering if he could have offered this woman something, if he could have given her something of hope. And it was then that he hit the bottom of the emptiness of his life.

After he closed that stainless steel door, he leaned back against it, looked across the room and there on a shelf were bottles containing fetuses in formaldehyde. They were there for research purposes. And there he was, standing in the midst of graphic images of the beginning and the end of the cycle of life and he had absolutely nothing for which to live. And he could not see spending the rest of his life feeling this emptiness, going from one fad to the next, going from one meaningless experience to another. And yet God's Spirit was still very quietly present within him as he stood in the silence of that ceramic-tiled morgue.



“The Return of the Prodigial Son”
He Qi (China: 1992)

Interestingly, a few days later, he received a letter in the mail from a Christian study center in Switzerland. The study commune was called “L’Abri” which, in French, means ‘shelter.’

About twelve months before, when Andy was still in college, he had written a letter to the organization asking if he could come there to study. They had lost the letter and had only recently found it on the floor

behind a filing cabinet. In hindsight Andy told me that he felt there might have been a reason for this one year wait for admittance into that center.

When Andy got the acceptance letter, he decided he was going to give Christianity one last chance, so he went to this community in a tranquil little Swiss

town that was run by a group of Christians. A number of families there opened their homes to college students, many of whom were like Andy who wanted to study philosophy and Christianity as well as survey several of the other religions in comparison.

On his way to the study center, Andy stayed in a small hotel room in Geneva, Switzerland. He looked out the window at the most spectacular snow-capped mountain range in the world – the French Alps. As he saw the magnificence of those mountains and Lake Geneva below it, it only reminded him of the greater and more intense emptiness within him. And he vowed to himself, in that hotel room, that he would end his life if he did not find meaning from this Christianity but he would try one more time. It seemed to him that he had tried everything else but perhaps he had overlooked something in the faith of his childhood.

After arriving and settling into this mountainside village, he sat through a few lectures and Bible studies but it all sounded the same. In the evenings, he would walk down to the village pub and drink enough to take his mind off the emotional pain that he felt.

But one night he came out of the town pub, drunk again, and he was walking up the mountain road trying to forget the emptiness he felt. He looked over the side of the road, at the lights of the Swiss villages in the valley below, silhouetted by the mountains in their grandeur in the background.

He thought back through much of what he had experienced. He reflected on how he had lived in a dingy apartment in Chicago, trying to hold down a job in the city, while he was having incredible personal experiences that were exhilarating and dangerous. He realized that these experiences, into which he put himself, were only an attempt to take his mind away from his sense of meaninglessness.

He remembered the months of feeling utterly empty and how trivial life was to be living between pay checks for no reason. And as he walked along that road, he remembered the people who had reached out to help him, even though he was so focused on himself that he didn't notice or appreciate their efforts. He realized that these people had helped him survive, that they had carried him along the way. And now here he was, his senses dulled again, still feeling

empty, still feeling as if life is meaningless, only this time he happened to be on a hillside in Switzerland, of all places, and he had brought all his problems with him. Andy realized, at that moment, that he could have been anywhere in the entire world and he would feel the same.

It was then that it came to him. He realized that God had been with him all along. He saw that despite the paths he had chosen for himself, throughout those years, God was still looking out for him.

Andy looked at the chalet he was about to enter, and he thought about how that couple had left everything, back in the United States, and had come over there and had opened up their home to total strangers – people who were searching, people with questions, people who were wanting to take more for themselves than what they could give others. This couple gave of themselves for people who would not give them privacy because the other guests, like him, had too many needs of their own. And Andy realized that God, once again, had put people like this in his life to be there for him.

He remembered their responses to him. They cared about him. They were patient, honest and vulnerable with him when he unloaded all of his negativity about the church and his disgust with phony religion. And Andy became overcome with the realization that if God would stick with him after all that he had been involved with, God must really care about him and that God must be a powerful and personal Presence in his life.

Andy thought again about the years behind him, the searching, the anger, the walks down dark and empty trails. But he also remembered the people who kept showing up in his life, who had accepted him despite his rough edges. Andy remembered his inner chaos but the good that was still quietly there. And he realized he had been trying very hard to get hold of life – trying to find the right philosophy or the ultimate experience.

He had been trying to do the right things, to live his life to the fullest. And all of these many attempts to *control* his life and to *master* knowledge or to *achieve* pleasure had miserably failed in one way or the other.

But something within told him to stop trying and to just accept God's love and he did. When Andy came to that point, that evening, he immediately did something that he alone had to do. It was a strange thing, perhaps stereotypical, in a way, and he never told others about it because it was a very private act (that I think he told only to me). But he sat down beside the guard rail of the road and said: "God, we've got to become partners because with just me running my life – it's going nowhere."

You see, on that hillside, that evening, Andy discovered that he was basically a good person, despite all the emotional garbage and guilt he had heard from a few people in the churches of his youth. And with all of this questioning and experimentation, he hadn't even noticed that God had been with him all the time – that God had made him to be a basically nice guy with a lot to offer others. God was with him and had been with him all along but he hadn't been able to see that good (that was already within him) – a good he didn't see until he came home to himself.

For the first time since the early years when he had become a Christian, Andy remembered the good within him and he caught a vision of what he wanted. As he looked out at the evening sky and the beauty of the stars, over the snow capped Swiss Alps, he asked himself: "What is it that you want to do with the rest of your life?" It was the same question he had asked himself as he stood alone in the hospital morgue a few months before. And it seemed to him that what he wanted most was to be doing something for God which benefited others – making his life one which contributed something to other people. He realized that for the last couple of years, he had been doing everything but what he truly wanted to do with his life. Andy realized that everything he had done had been a choice and all of his choices had nothing to do with what he really wanted most for his life.

Once he saw what is most important to him, without much will power at all, he started to make the small decisions fit into his vision of what he wanted most for his life. Like the prodigal son in the parable, Andrew chose to turn his life around. And when he did, he found that the way back home was not far at all because it was as near to him as the next choice he had to make. Andy found the good within himself that so

many people, along the way, had been trying to help him find. And Andy found, once again, the presence of the loving God in his life.



What I suggest, for those of you who are searching for meaning in life, is take a look at your life. Ask yourself if you are happy. Never be afraid to question your faith and your values and if something doesn't make sense or seems oppressive, you're probably right. Trust yourself.

But as you discard what is *not* right for you, be quick to move on and next ask yourself: "What is it that you *are* choosing to do with your life instead?" Your life is a novel and only you are the author and editor of your life's script. Honestly seek what is ultimately most important to you.

Set aside the mistakes your parents are making and have made. Life is crude and your parents have only been doing the best they can, just as you will be making lots of mistakes with your own kids. It's time to get on with your own life – despite what they've done or not done. Focus your attention away from them and stop and envision what it is that you really want to do with yourself.

Next, without a lot of struggle and heartache, start to align the smaller decisions with your deepest desires. You don't have to change the world. You don't have to drive yourself through sheer will power. You just have to take the troubles of the day, as Jesus suggests, and creatively work your way along through the small choices that lead toward what is most important to you.

Right now, your life may have a lot of unknowns in the future. Some of you may feel totally alienated from what you understand to be "Christianity." You may feel that life is like a cartoon and you see yourself detached, walking through the pages of a script in which you would rather not be. You are going to be faced with many more new choices but you alone make the decisions to walk down certain paths in terms of your life-style, religion and how you look at and interpret life.¹ But *before* you try to cover the waterfront of human experience, look within you.

¹ Which is your philosophy of life

You may not have had anyone in your life telling you this, lately, but there is a lot of beauty within you. You are a good person because that's the way God made you and God deeply loves you. And all you have to do is trust yourself, enter into a trusting partnership with God and think about what it is that you want most for your life. Make a major decision to choose what is ultimately most important to you and then, day by day, starting right now, choose to line up your small choices with what you want most for your life. Step out on your journey toward what you value the most, knowing that God will always be with you every minute – no matter where you find yourself.

There may come a time when you feel that the bottom has dropped out of your life and you can not bear the pain of living any longer. God is not going to suddenly appear in a pillar of smoke over your stereo or out of the sky over a parking lot. But God's presence will come to you as you think back through your past experiences and your present ones.

As you look at the people God has sent along your way, especially in those places where you found that you could not go on, you'll discover that not only was God with you in the past but God is with you now. You will see God in the very people who have helped you hold it together for one more day.

And for those of you who are parents or grandparents of young adults who have drifted far from what you had hoped for them, there will come a time when you have lost your kids. There is nothing you can do or say that will save them from this sort of despair if they have chosen to travel these dark roads. But when you have lost faith in what *you* can do, remember the power of *God*. Remember that no matter where your children may find themselves in life, God is there and God will stand by them in every moment and in every experience they have.

As Andy looks back to that period in his life, he now sees, in hindsight, that he had to become lost before he could fully appreciate being found. He had to find what wouldn't work for him before he grew up and took charge of his life and went after what he really wanted.

Andrew also realizes today, with a mighty soberness within him, that God's Spirit always

remains within us and *nothing* can ever separate anyone from God's love – nothing.

The last I heard, the character in this morning's story is not going by "Andrew," which is his middle name. He's actually making his living as a minister (of all things) in a small protestant church somewhere in the Western part of New York State referred to as "Cheektowaga."



"The Return of the Prodigal Son"
Rembrandt von Rijn (1606-1669)