

“And When He Came to Himself”

**Bob Setzer, Jr.
Pastor**

**Knollwood Baptist Church
Winston Salem, NC**

www.knollwood.org

April 7, 2019

Luke 15:11-24

He was the kind of kid who always shows up in the principal's office: surly, sarcastic, a smart aleck. The teachers just couldn't understand it. His older brother was such a joy: straight A's, president of the student body, an eagle scout. But the younger son was trouble. It was hard to believe those two came from the same family.

Rumor had it the younger boy went to seed when his mama died. Her death broke his heart and the wound never healed. So he cemented over the pain with a tough guy demeanor that never let anyone near, not even his father who shared his devastating loss. The boy was like a boat that slipped its moorings, drifting farther and farther out to sea.

By the time the kid scraped together enough credits to graduate from high school, he could hardly wait to skip town. He wanted no part of the family business, especially since his older brother, the Boy Scout, was always on his back. So he went to his old man and demanded his share of the estate.

The request just about broke his daddy's heart. Clearly, the boy didn't care for his father's company; just his assets would do. The father pondered his options. He knew it was useless to reason with the boy. And he wasn't about to hold him hostage. So without a word, he

went over to the wall safe and pulled out his cash reserves. "All right, son," he said, "here's your share. Do with it what you will."

The boy gaped at the stack of bills, greedily, then grabbed the cash and dashed from the room.

What kind of father would do such a thing? Squander all that cash on a no-count son?

But then this parable is not a primer on parenting. This is not a blog post on "How to Help a Troubled Teen." This is a story about . . . God. It is an imaginative tale, spun by Jesus, about the One who created a bright, shiny new world and then tossed Adam and Eve the keys.

Why would God give human beings the freedom to wreck such a wondrous creation? The short answer seems to be God didn't want perfect little children towing the line out of fear. So in a stunning gambit of cosmic gumption, God took the terrifying risk of setting God's children free.

A small businessman asked his employees to submit suggestions about improving their job performance. "When I come in each morning," said the boss, "I like to see everyone in their place, started on the day's work. Please put your comments in the suggestions box about how we can make that happen."

The next day, there was a single suggestion in the box: "Dear boss, if you really want to see everyone busily at work when you come in, then wear squeaky shoes!"

The father in Jesus' story wasn't interested in having a son motivated by fear, and neither was the One who set this grand universe in motion. So God gave the human creature the choice to love God or not, preferring to risk losing him or her altogether rather than settle for a pretend intimacy, devoid of love.

And so, the father in the story gave the boy what he asked: his share of the estate. After that, the kid packed his bags and high tailed it out of town. In the classic prose of the King James English, he went to the "far country," probably Athens or Rome or some other big city where the action was. And there, says Jesus, "he squandered his property in dissolute living."

Now as to exactly what “dissolute living” is, Jesus leaves that to the imagination, perhaps because that place we sink to at our worst; is not the same for everybody. According to the older brother’s accusation, later in the story, the prodigal squandered his inheritance on prostitutes. But that charge probably tells us more about what the prickly older brother imagined *he* might do under similar circumstances, than his kid brother.

True, for some, the far country is a season of recklessness and debauchery. But for others, the far country is a relentless perfectionism that robs life of vitality and joy; or a simmering anger that leaves somebody blaming everyone else for their troubles. In other words, the far country is wherever and however you lose touch with yourself . . . and lose touch with God.

But one can only live in the far country so long, before there is a crisis. That’s because we cannot thrive while denying our essential nature as children of God and spurning the company of the one in whom we “live and move and have our being.” For the younger brother, the crisis came when he spent all his money and maxed out his credit cards. Then a terrible famine hit the land and he was reduced to feeding pigs, an especially repugnant fate for a Jewish boy like himself who considered pigs unclean.

And it was there, in the haunting words of scripture that this wayward son “came to himself,” a phrase suggesting he not *been* himself while living in defiance of the father’s love. And neither are we when lost in some spiritual wasteland, we squander our best and brightest selves.

In one of his sermons, Fred Craddock tells about a young couple who lived in a town he served as pastor. The couple held rowdy Saturday night parties that scandalized the local community. Yet this couple had a beautiful little girl who always came to church. Every Sunday she was present, drinking up the stories about Jesus as a desert wanderer falls upon a spring in an oasis, slurping up salvation.

Then one fateful Sunday morning, Craddock looked out to see the little girl sitting with two strangers. They turned out to be her parents. And at the close of the service, as the congregation gaped in amazement, the couple came forward to accept Christ.

"What prompted this?" asked Craddock.

"Well, you know about our parties?"

"I've heard about them," Craddock answered.

"Well, last night, there was too much drinking and the party got out of hand. It woke our little girl. She came down the stairs and seeing all the eating and drinking, she said, 'Oh, can I give the blessing?'"

"And then, standing on the third step, she prayed, 'God is great, God is good. Let us thank him for our food . . . *Goodnight everybody!*'"

"Even as she started back up the stairs, everybody was saying, 'Wow, it's getting late. We gotta be going. In a few short minutes, the house was empty.

The minutes dragged by as the little girl's mother and father dad busied themselves picking up crumpled napkins, half-empty glasses, and plucking peanuts from the floor. They met at the sink, each bearing a tray full of trash. Eyes full of pain and sadness; the husband said what both were thinking" "*Where do we think we're going?*"

The next morning, they were at church, the first day of the rest of their lives.

In what far country did you "come to yourself" and discover you weren't the person you wanted to be? For some, the far country is a sudden illness that halts the rat race and forces a long, hard look at oneself, only to discover the things you have been living for don't count for much in the clutch. For others, the far country is the sickening aftermath of some great betrayal. Sometimes the far country is the self-loathing that comes after wounding a loved one in a quarrel. Once the blood is drawn and the exhilaration gone, only the shame and remorse remain. "How could I have *said* that? How could I have *done* that?" one wonders. The questions

pummel the soul like waves crashing against the shore, until we are brought face-to-face with how far we have fallen from the person we hoped to be.

"Home," said the poet Robert Frost, "is that place when you go there, they have to take you in." The rebellious son in Jesus' parable began to long for home. Sitting in his pigsty, surveying his wreck of a life, he remembered the beauty of his father's rolling estate. He remembered the quiet, serene hills and the peach orchard where his mama was buried. He remembered ambling through the fields and skinny dipping in the pond. How he ached to hear his father's voice, to smell his daddy's aftershave, and to see the laughter in his eyes.

Still, it never occurred to this desperate boy he might be received back as a son. Life in the far country had emptied him of that kind of gall. He just hoped to hire on as one of his daddy's field hands. At least then, he could be near the people and land he loved. So screwing up his courage, he pulled himself together and headed home.

Several weeks later, the boy's father was finishing up some work in his office. He looked wistfully out the window, as he had a thousand times before, hoping for any sign of his long, lost boy.

Suddenly, he saw a figure in the distance shuffling toward the house. For one heart-stopping moment, he thought it was his son. Surely it couldn't be!

And yet as he squinted, he saw the familiar lines of his son's silhouette, the long, stringy hair, and the barest hint of the old swagger. At the sight, a wellspring of anguished love burst forth in his soul. And in an instant, he was bounding down the stairs and out the door.

Heart pounding, the father ran to meet his son. Forgetting appearances, he tore down the road, whooping and hollering and flailing his arms. The boy bit his lip, trying to be strong, but tears started coursing down his cheeks. And when the two of them met, the boy disappeared in a bear hug of grace. He whimpered as his father hugged him close and a thousand anguished memories began to melt.

The boy began his carefully crafted confession. "Father, I have sinned, and am no longer worthy to be called your son . . ." But the father, punch drunk with joy, wouldn't let him finish. Instead, he started barking orders: "Put my signet ring on his finger! Get rid of these rags and get my boy something decent to wear! Put some sandals on his feet; I'll not have any boy of mine wandering around barefoot like a slave! And kill the fatted calf so we can party! For this son of mine who was dead is alive again; the one who was lost is found!"

This poignant scene of a father embracing a wayward son is Jesus' most unforgettable portrait of God. Jesus paints a picture of God as a loving, fretful parent, eager to welcome a lost son or daughter home. Indeed, the father Jesus describes is unlike any father most of us have known. For this father has a daddy's grit but a mother's tenderness and devotion. The father in Jesus' story is like the world's best mama and daddy rolled into one tearful, inexhaustible embodiment of wild, reckless love.

That's why when I think of the God who draws near in Jesus, I don't just think of my father; I think of my mama too. For the God Jesus brings near is a *motherly* father to me.

And so, this motherly father, this fatherly mother of a God, waits to welcome every prodigal son or daughter home. For Jesus wants us to know we can have a fresh start, no matter how badly we have faltered, no matter how far our fall. As Buckner Fanning said so well, "No one can go back and have a new beginning." But because of God's grace in Jesus Christ, "anyone can start now and have a new ending."

I'm a big fan of Kate Campbell, a folk singer out of Nashville. Kate has a small, but dedicated following. She grew up in the home of a prominent Baptist preacher so she sings songs of faith, but always sprinkled with more rascally tunes. One gets the impression, listening to her music, that Kate knows the terrain of the far country where lost, beleaguered souls waste away for want of their true spiritual home.

My favorite Kate Campbell tune is titled, "Jesus Is the Way Home." Against her sweet guitar accompaniment, in a lilting voice, she sings,

There's a garden down in Alabam, not too far south of
Birmingham
Painted signs and crosses by the road one says,
"Jesus is the way home."

Then around that arresting image, she builds a song.

If you're trying to put that whiskey down and you realize
you're losing ground
You don't have to walk that road alone,
"Jesus is the way home."

You don't have to worry where you're at, or why you're there,
He knows all that.
You just let the good book be your map,
"Jesus is the way home."

You see, that's the best part of the story. The parable of the prodigal son is not *just* a story. It is the riveting truth about what God is doing in Jesus Christ. Because no matter where you lost your way, or squandered what was most precious to you in all the world, *Jesus is the way home*. Jesus is the way home to the divine mother and father of us all, the God waiting, even now, with eager, open arms, to welcome *all* God's children home.

Then, as tears of joy stream down God's cheeks, and maybe your own, the blessed benediction sounds again: "My son! My daughter! who was dead, is alive again. The beloved who was lost is found!"

Gracious, loving, ever faithful God, send Jesus to fetch us in whatever far country where we lost our way. Then help us follow him all the way home to you. In his name we ask this, but for our sakes we pray, amen.
