

IX Trinity 2020
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish
Father Craig Looney
1 Cor. 10.1-13 St. Luke 15.11-32



He asked his father for his share of the estate now. His father must have been saddened by his younger son's demand. But he divided the property equally between him and his older brother. The younger son then left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery.

The Story of the Lost Son is part three of a three-part story that includes the stories of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin we heard several weeks ago. The common element in all three stories is something gets lost and then is found...and a big celebration follows.

The Lost Son eventually realizes the mess he has created for himself when the country experiences a famine and he has no money left. He decides to begin the long arduous journey home and say to his father, "I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men."

We know how the story turns out. His father sees his younger son off in the distance and runs out to greet him. He throws his arms around him, welcomes him home, and a great celebration follows. And the father says, "My son was lost and dead; now he is found and alive." A story with a happy ending...or is it?

In his book *Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, Dutch Roman Catholic priest, Father Henri J.M. Nouwen (1932-1996) asks us to consider what he sees as deeper spiritual elements of the story: the younger son's return, the father's restoration of sonship, the elder son's vengefulness, and the father's compassion (for both sons).

Father Nouwen writes, "...implicit in the 'return' is a leaving. In order to understand the return, we must explore the depth of what it means to leave home." According to Father Nouwen, the younger son already "left" long before he ran away and returned. He was really saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead already."

"What is happening here," Father Nouwen writes, "is an unheard of event: hurtful,

offensive, and in radical contradiction to the most venerated tradition of the time." What the younger son did when he left for the foreign country was reject everything he had including his father's love. He tried to wipe out his existence for something else.

His redemption and return begin when he says these words, "Father...I no longer deserve to be called your son." He realizes he never lost his father's sonship...what he lost was the dignity that went along with being his father's son.

We don't often talk about the older son? How does he react when he hears his brother has returned home? He refuses to join the celebration. "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any order of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid to celebrate with my friends. But for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property-he and his loose women-you kill the calf we had been fattening."

The father has love and compassion for his two sons equally. The older brother rejects his father's love and becomes lost in resentment at his younger brother's homecoming. He too has the dignity of his father's sonship...but instead of welcoming his younger brother home he walks away in anger and disgust. The older brother is also a "lost son".

The Story of the Lost Son is about loss and redemption and is ultimately a story about us. We should see something of ourselves in both the younger and older sons. We sometimes lose our way in life and bottom out and feel alone, helpless and beyond hope. We may even feel God has forgotten about us...we may feel we are beyond his forgiveness. We need to start the long journey home. We sometimes secretly resent others. And we should try to show the same kind of love and compassion the father shows equally toward his two sons.

We all like stories with happy endings. Father Nouwen suggests unlike a fairy tale, the Story of the Lost Son provides no happy ending. Instead it leaves us face-to-face with one of life's hardest spiritual choices: to trust or not to trust in God's all-forgiving love.

What choice will we make?

