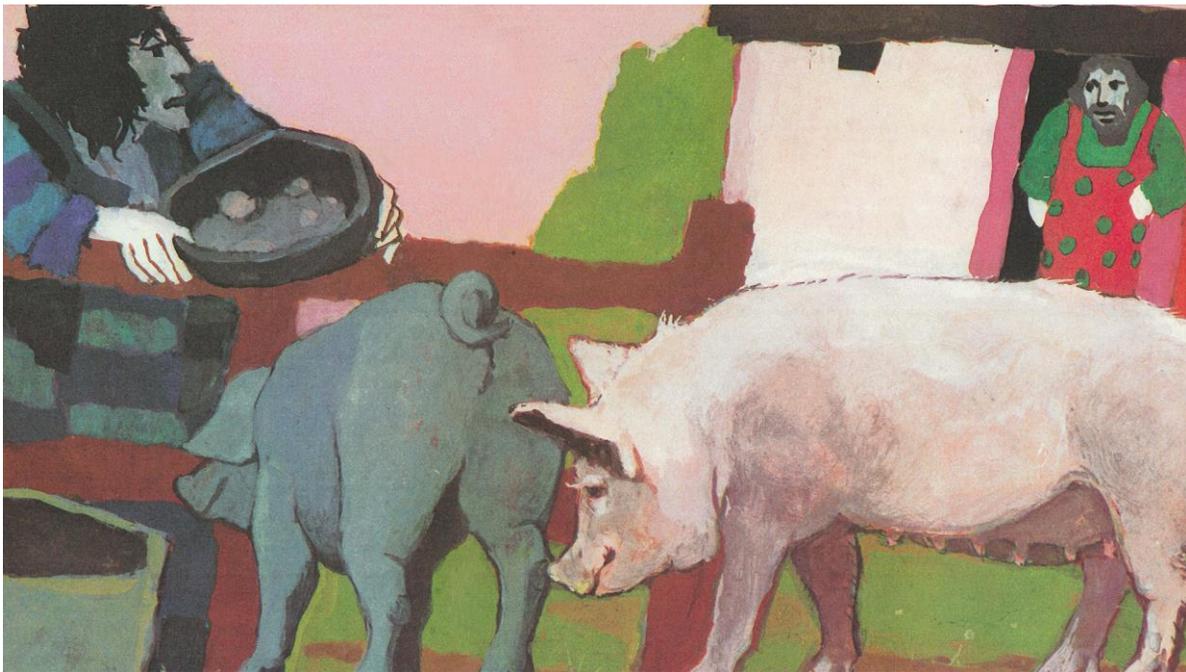


What's My Line?
Lenten Series on the Prodigal Son
Luke 15: 1-32
Don Lincoln

A young man inherited \$250,000 from the estate of his uncle who died. The young man immediately began living the life of his dreams, but within a year the large sum had all been spent and he was broke. When the young man's father heard about it, he asked his son in astonishment, "What did you do with all that money.?"

"Well," the son said, 'I spent \$60,000 on a new sports car, and \$20,000 on a spring break trip to Tahiti with my girlfriend. Then I went through \$75,000 on my weekend in Las Vegas. And it cost another \$15,000 for the party I threw for my fraternity. But – I'm afraid the remaining \$80,000 I just squandered foolishly!"

We don't actually know how the younger son in the story spent his inheritance. What we do know, however, is that the money is **GONE**. And there's a famine in the land. The jig is up.



So the young son gets a job feeding someone's pigs. Not at the top of most folks career choices, and definitely not for a Jewish boy. He's desperate enough to do even this detestable work.

Notice the text says he would have gladly filled himself with the pods the pigs were eating. Then why didn't he?

Because the pods were not sufficient to sustain him. They are probably pods from the carob tree, which the pig can gobble up by the bucketful, but not the young man – they're not sufficient, sustaining food. In other words, he's not only working with pigs – it's as if he is wishing to **BE** a pig – so he could eat the pods – and survive. That's how bad it's gotten for him.



But then, the text tells us, “**he came to himself.**”

The classic interpretation of this story is the young man had an “Aha!” moment – sitting among the pigs, clothes in rags, mud caked to his body – he realized what he had squandered, understood the travesty he had made of his life, and is willing to get up, eat crow, offer a “mea culpa” – come home with his tail between his legs. He will return to his father in apology, and hope for the best. In other words, a classic story of repentance.

That may very well be the interpretation to make – a story of repentance. But I don't believe that's the only interpretation. And I'm not alone.

One of my favorite preachers Will Willimon says, “You may have heard the younger son repented, that he had some profound religious experience in the pigsty. But this is to overrate the young man. He is simply hungry. He is thinking of one person only: Himself. If anything, he hatches a rather cynical plan to go home and use his father again.¹

YES, he does have an “Aha” moment. “Even my father's servants get three squares a day. Why can't I? Hmm... let me see. I know what I'll do. I will go to my father and I will say, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ **He even rehearses his speech!**”

Amy Jill-Levine, a Jewish scholar and Professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt writes that first-century folks listening to Jesus “may have heard not contrition but conniving.” Junior is

described as “coming to himself.” YEAH! And **THAT** self is one who knows how to try once more to get what he wants. Junior recalls Daddy still has money back at the home front. “Maybe I can get some more.”

Levine suggests Junior’s lack of remorse is found in his line, “I have sinned against heaven and before you.” She says, “Any of Jesus’ listeners who were biblically literate would’ve immediately heard an echo of the empty words Pharaoh mouths in order to stop the plagues. (I don’t know if you know the story about the plagues – Israel is captive; they are in slavery and Egypt and plagues are coming. There are frogs and locusts and blood in the river.....). Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, ‘I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you’.” (spoken with an overly-affected spirituality!). Preacher David Buttrick concisely summarizes the prodigal’s strategy: “I’ll go to Daddy and sound religious.”²

New Testament scholar Ken Bailey lived in the Middle East for decades. He came and did a weekend of lectures and preached for us here at Westminster back in 2003. A dear friend and great scholar, Ken explored this text by walking through Middle Eastern villages and ask people what they thought of the story. He says they all clearly thought the son expresses no remorse, does not say he shamed the family, or caused the father deep pain, nor does he voice regret that he lost the money. While talking to himself he thinks, in effect, “I’m hungry. Others eat while I am hungry. I must do something.”

Bailey also dug into some of the ancient Arabic translations of scripture, translated them into English, and said the Arabic translations of this text actually say, NOT “he came to himself,” but that “He got smart.” They don’t use language of repentance.

Is it possible Junior is not coming home because he’s sorry, but to go back to the well a second time? NOT coming home for reconciliation, but for a better job than feeding pigs? He’s still negotiating.

After all, he doesn’t offer to be taken on as a lowly slave by his father – a slave who gets no pay; only room and board – just enough to survive – by working the field. Bailey says the Greek in the story means “craftsman.”³ The son is asking to be trained as a skilled craftsman, a worker who makes a good living. For which he may not even have the talent. He’s still trying the angles. “What’s my line?”

But it makes me wonder.....like the younger son, are **YOUR** motives and **MY** motives in repentance ever pure? Are they often mixed at best? How often do our apologies have an ulterior motive? This son was willing to say whatever it took because he was HUNGRY! Most of us bargain.

“Look dad, I’m sorry for what I did. I’ll never do it again. Can I have the car?”

“God forgive me. Please don’t give me what I deserve. I’ll do better. I promise.”

As a judge in a rather notorious case recently said, "Saying 'I'm sorry I got caught' is not an inspiring plea for leniency." But how many of us have used some version of that? We shed crocodile tears, we rehearse speeches, we get our hair cut, put on our best suit, and try our very best to look contrite and sound like we mean it.

Most of us don’t repent, until we’re caught.

Who of us does not enter special pleadings when we've found ourselves on the backside of life, to cover our embarrassment and shame; to salvage self-respect, to get ourselves at least a little bit off the hook.⁴ "Well, you see God, it's this way. I got off track. I was out of my mind. I just wasn't myself. I wasn't at my best. I was a little dumber than I thought I was. But I'm smarter now. I see things more clearly. So – what can you do for me?"

Winston Churchill was once asked, "Are you ready to meet your maker?" In typical, pithy response, Churchill said, "I am ready to meet my maker. Whether He is ready for the ordeal of meeting me is another matter entirely."⁵

Many of us probably think the son got what he deserved in the far country. Maybe he did. You reap what you sow. And if he wants to come home, we want to hear a repentant confession. We want him to grovel. We want him to admit what he did – come clean. Then, perhaps, but only then, will he, SHOULD he receive a gracious welcome.

But I ask you, in the two stories prior to this, the lost coin; the lost sheep. Did the coin repent? Did the sheep repent? Neither one did. I wonder if those two stories leading into this text are perhaps a lesson for us. The Good News we will focus on next week is that it is not repentance that makes Junior right with his father. It is his lostness. The son was lost, and is found. The son was dead and is alive. And like him, you and I never want to admit we're dead. "Without hope, except in God's sovereign mercy" – as the old questions for church membership used to say.

We're always angling just a little bit. And until you and I acknowledge that we are without hope, I offer you this – maybe that's not really repentance.

Here's the rub for me in this story. You and I must get off the idea that the **lost must find itself first**, before the Finding One will get up off His lounge chair and come look for us. As if we have something to offer. A friend of mine wrote the following, one-sentence prayer in response to this text:

O God, we rehearse our words too well, walking back to you, thinking that the words we have put together will make you love us more.

No words can do that. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

1. Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource, March 2007
2. Amy Jill Levine Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi. 2014
3. Ken Bailey, The Cross and the Prodigal, 2005.
4. Feasting on the Gospels, commentary on Luke 15: 11-32; 2014.
5. Homiletics, March 2010.