

The Prodigal Son

A Sermon by Rev. Thomas L. Kline

"This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:24).

Jesus said that a man had two sons. The younger son went to his father and demanded his inheritance. It says he went to a far-off country, and there he wasted all that he had with riotous living. A famine arose in the land, and the young man had nothing to eat. And so he hired himself out to go into the fields to feed the swine. He was so hungry that he would have eaten the food of the pigs. But suddenly, he came to himself. He said to himself, "I will go to my father and ask him for forgiveness, and I will become as a hired servant to him." We can picture the young man coming back after a long journey. Will his father forgive him? Will his father be angry with him?

His father is waiting for him! His father sees him at a distance, runs to him, and embraces him. The father has compassion on his son. And at the end of this story, we hear those words of the father to the older brother: "It is right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found."

There is something in each of us that is touched by the power of this parable. This is because it is a story of hope. We might have a friend or relative that seems to turn from the Lord. We might have a friend that for a time seems lost, spiritually wounded, a person in a time of spiritual crisis. And the everlasting message of this parable is that there is a way back. The Lord gives us a path to restore our souls no matter how hopeless the situation.

The father figure in this parable is so important. It is a picture of the Lord Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ as our heavenly Father. And what we see is a picture of the Divine love. When the young man returns, we don't see the father demanding payment or retribution for the son's sins. We don't see anything that suggests the traditional dogmas of Divine atonement or punishment for sin. No, those old-fashioned, traditional ideas of God are not based on Scripture. In this parable we see only forgiveness after the long journey of repentance and reformation. The father celebrates his son's return. The Lord rejoices when we come back to our spiritual home.

There is a message in this parable for a church congregation. The reason why Jesus even told this parable was that the church leaders of that time came to Him complaining that He was spending too much time with sinners. The scribes and Pharisees were murmuring because Jesus was associating with sinners, drunkards, and tax collectors. And the Lord's answer was simple: "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick." This is why He had come to bring sinners to repentance, and to restore their lives.

And so we ask the question of ourselves: What is the purpose of our church? What is the purpose of this congregation? Certainly the church is for the worship of the Lord. Certainly it is for the proclaiming of the Lord's Word. It is for the life of charity and service. But the church also exists for something else.

In the book of Revelation, the New Church is said to be the "healing of the nations." The leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of the nations. It is a vision of the church as a hospital, the church as a place for spiritual healing, the church as a place where the sick and wounded come. There is a battle going on in the world today. It is a great battle between heaven and hell. And, as in any battle, there will be casualties: our sons and daughters, our friends and neighbors, our family. And the church is the place for those who are hurting, those who at times have failed, those who are dying spiritually, to come and receive support in the road that leads back to a restoration. It is a vision of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Divine physician.

But there is a more interior meaning to this story. It is a level of meaning opened by the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Jerusalem. This story of the prodigal son is the personal story of our rebirth and regeneration. It is the story of the Lord's healing our troubled heart. And in this story, we find, step by step, the journey that we take as the Lord leads us on the path to heaven.

Let's just look at the steps of regeneration outlined in this story.

Number one is permission, what the Writings of the New Church call the "doctrine of permission." In this story the father allows his son to leave and go to a distant land. It almost seems that the father willingly gives his son all of his inheritance knowing that this will lead to grief and pain for the son. And how can this be? Why would a loving father do this?

The Writings of the New Church say that this permission to leave is a picture of the magnitude of the Lord's love and wisdom in our lives. The Lord loves us so much that He will even allow us to turn from Him at times if this is what we truly choose. He will allow us to turn from Him and even experience the consequences, the pain and suffering of that turning away. And this is said to be of His permission, not of His will.

He grieves when we turn and suffer the consequences of evil. The pain of evil is not the Lord's punishment; no, the Lord weeps for us. And still, in His love He allows this because in His infinite wisdom He foresees that sometimes it is only through the process of the journey that we can finally choose what is good, fight for what is good, and make what is good our own. So number one: the Lord permits us to leave.

And step number two: If we do choose to turn from Him, He is not passive. If we do choose to turn from Him, He protects and guides us every step of the way. He is with us on the perilous journey.

We have a beautiful teaching in the Writings of the New Church that during times of temptation and despair it seems as if the Lord has left us, whereas in fact He is closer than ever. The Lord is closest to us in times of temptation.

In this parable it seems that once the son left home and went to the distant land, his father was out of the picture. It seems that his father just stayed home and worried. It is important to realize that this is written from the viewpoint of the son: When we turn from God it seems as if He is distant from us; that's how it feels to us.

But from the Lord's perspective, He never leaves us. If we could re-write this parable from the Lord's viewpoint, the father would be with that son in that distant land, actively protecting, guiding and leading.

How does the Lord protect us when we are in the distant land? First is the famine. The Lord allows us to hunger in the distant land. He allows us to hunger for righteousness. The Lord will never let us be completely satisfied with evil. No, something inside of us will hunger for a life that is higher. And it is this hunger that finally causes us to turn back to the Lord. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

Another thing He does when we are in the distant land: He withholds us from further evils. In the parable, it says the son was almost to the point where he was about to eat the food of the pigs, but he didn't eat it. A person who has been in a state of disorder will often say, "Yes, I was in terrible disorder, but somehow there was something preventing me from going all the way down to hell. Something was holding me back." The Lord's hand is there protecting us from the hells even when we are in active evil.

A third thing He does when we are in the distant land: The Lord causes us to remember our home; He lets us remember our spiritual home. In the story the son remembered his father's house. We hear the words, "I will arise and go to my father." It's a memory of heaven. The Writings of the New church speak about heavenly memories that stay with us always. Memories of heaven that remain with us sometimes we call these "heavenly remains." No matter where we are in life, we all have a memory of heaven (sometimes from our earliest childhood) stored up in the interior parts of our minds. And that memory of heaven tempers and bends our life back to our spiritual home, when we are in the height of temptation and despair.

But then we come to the climax of the story, the turning point, and it is the turning point in our lives. The story says that the young man was in the field, far from his home, hungry. The young man, when he was at his lowest moment of despair, came to his senses. One translation says, "He came to himself." It is the beginning of true repentance. For the first time we find him thinking the words, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you."

The young man suddenly sees his life in a new way. It is as if his eyes are opened. It is interesting that the Writings of the New Church use the word "inversion" when they talk about this change. When it seems as if things can't get any worse, suddenly we come to this turning point; we come to this moment of change, and our lives are totally inverted. Everything is changed from top to bottom. The love of self that used to be at the top is now at the bottom, and in its place is a love of the Lord and the neighbor. We hear the words, "I will go and serve my father; I will hire myself to him; I will be as servant to him," and we begin to lay down our lives. Jesus said, "He that shall lose his life for my sake shall find it."

And we find that there is a road back home. That's the young man journeying back home, retracing every step that He had taken. The Writings of the New Church call this "reformation." And notice the power of that word: the Lord literally "re-forms" us. He makes us anew.

And then there is a time of rejoicing. Here are some of the internal meanings revealed in the Writings of the New Church: The ring the father put on his son's finger pictures "internal conjunction." The robe pictures "truths of our faith and trust in God." The sandals picture our life changed even to the most "down-to-earth" parts. And the fatted calf pictures our life of charity.

So this entire 15th chapter of the gospel of Luke deals with the subject of lost things and the Lord's rejoicing over what is lost being found again. Let us take these wonderful teachings and apply them to our lives. Let us reach out with hope and forgiveness to those who are hurting, supporting them on the Divine path of restoration. Let us express this love of the Lord Himself as He comes to restore our own lives toward heaven, realizing that in His sight we are all in need of the Divine healing. This is a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Divine physician, and tells His everlasting message of hope: "It is right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found." Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 84, Luke 15, TCR 394-5