

All the Way Home: Four Approaches to the Same Text

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Rabbi Edwin H. Friedman offered countless gifts to those of us who are involved in ministry with his insights about family systems and how they are at work in faith communities. In the book *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Friedman writes:

The colossal misunderstanding of our time is the assumption that insight will work with people who are unmotivated to change. Communication does not depend on syntax, or eloquence, or rhetoric, or articulation but on the emotional context in which the message is being heard. People can only hear you when they are moving toward you, and they are not likely to when your words are pursuing them. Even the choicest words lose their power when they are used to overpower. Attitudes are the real figures of speech.¹

Having heard of congregations who had made a sermon series out of a single biblical text, my colleague and I decided to try a similar approach for Lent. We reviewed possibilities: a part of Romans 8 or Romans 12, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and John 3 seemed to each hold possibilities. We kept returning to Luke 15 and three parables told in that chapter about the lost—lost sheep, lost coin, lost child. The final of these three, often called “Jesus’ masterpiece,” about the Prodigal Son/Elder Brother/Loving Parent seemed to fit best in our congregational context. It is no great insight to say that family dynamics are everywhere in church life, but especially mindful of Friedman’s insights, it seemed that this parable held the potential for a weeks-long church conversation.

What surprised us was the depth of the conversations and capacity to go deeper and deeper into both the text and congregational needs over the course of several weeks. Using Friedman’s words, the text stirred up conversation of our motivation (or lack thereof) to change. The wisdom that “people can only hear you when they are moving toward you” took on renewed depth when we looked at the actions of all in the parable, particularly the parent.

The sermon series led us into genuine, multi-dimensional conversations with congregants about the nature of parables, the different points of entry into this text, their own family systems, as well as new insights about their relationship with God. We found that after a couple of weeks of the series, folks were approaching us to talk about their own lives and faith experiences and where they found themselves in the parable.

Even one of our elders who offered at the beginning that he would endure the series because he had “heard it and heard it and didn’t need to hear it again, let alone for four weeks” was joining the conversations. By the end of the four-week series on this one text, we couldn’t quite believe it, but we wished it could have continued for several more weeks. The opportunity to go deep into one text with a congregation over an extended time turned out to be a Lenten gift to all of us.

“Exposed” – 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Luke 15:1:19

For more than three years, the lake on Jack Mewbourn’s ranch in central Texas held a secret at its murky bottom: a 1999 Chevrolet Monte Carlo. His grandson was the first one to notice the top of the car peeking out of the water. It wasn’t luck or even fate—it was drought. The water level in the seven-acre lake has dropped about five feet from a lack of rain. Stand at the lake’s edge today, and in any other year you would be standing nearly waist-deep in water. Mr. Mewbourn called a local constable, and with the help of a diver and a tow truck, the vehicle was slowly dragged out. Inside, still buckled into the driver’s seat, were the remains of a young woman who had been missing since July 2008. The young woman’s family had reported her missing but had no inkling of what happened during the three-plus agonizing years. The rancher and the constable have found themselves calling a cruel thing like a drought a strange sort of blessing. “If it wouldn’t have been for the drought,” the constable said, “she’d probably still be in the car in that lake.”

With this severe drought, objects of all kinds that had been submerged for years, decades, and even centuries are being revealed. Some of the discovered items are common debris like computer monitors, tires, and sunken boats—but also long-submerged marble tombstones—whole cemeteries from the nineteenth century have become visible. At one lake north of Austin, where the water level has dropped 23 feet, fishermen found a human skull at the edge of the water last month.

In East Texas, the drought has hurt Donna McWilliams as it has other Texans. She and her husband lost trees and sold off cattle because of a lack of hay, but it also helped her. She is the sister of the young woman whose body was found in the car in the lake. Ms. Oliver’s relatives had mailed fliers with her picture to homeless shelters and clinics, always hoping, always wondering. “I guess ‘closure’ is the word,” said Ms. McWilliams, one of Ms. Oliver’s two sisters. “Now we don’t have to wonder anymore. I do think the drought is a negative, but if there’s anything that can happen good out of a drought, it’s this, and it’s a blessing.”²

In the fifteenth chapter of Luke’s gospel, Jesus tells three parables about being lost. Lost sheep, then lost coin, then lost people. People get lost—perilously lost—all the time. And when we, sooner or later, are caught in a drought, everything about our life is exposed.

Do you and I have to get this lost in order to be exposed so that we finally turn around and find our way home? No, I’m pretty sure there are those of us here whose “far country” has not been all that far, just as I’m fairly confident that all of us lose our way. But however we are lost, whatever tricks or cover-ups we have used to navigate through life, all gets exposed. Once we are lost, there are really two questions: How did this happen? And...what now?

How does it happen? It could be just our own ignorance or naiveté. A recent book, *Dear Me: Letters to My 16-Year Old Self*, tackles this question: What would you say to yourself if today you could write to the 16-year-old you? Well-known figures from J.K. Rowling to Hugh Jackman weigh in.

From 70’s Rocker Alice Cooper: “Trashy girls are exciting for about five minutes....Keep your eye out for a really good lookin’ church girl. Then you’ll have the best of both worlds. P.S. I think coffee might really catch on, maybe call it Starsomething....”

From Suze Roman: “Dear Suze in 1967, I just wanted to write you this letter

because I think it is important for you to know that you really do not need to be as sad as you currently are. Think great thoughts but always relish small treasures. Now stop wasting time being sad. Do you hear me?"

And from actor James Woods: "Be proud, but humble. Be strong, but caring. Listen more than you may be inclined to do. Talk less. And most importantly, call your brother on July 26, 2006 and tell him he must go to a different hospital. It is okay to fall, but not okay to stay on the ground. Cherish the dead you once loved so carelessly. They still live in your heart."³

That last letter, especially, might have stung the younger brother of our parable. He wished his father was as good as dead. And he fell hard and fast...and didn't know how to get up. Maybe he just was naïve to the perilous ways of the world. But, maybe he was trying to hide—hide from his family, hide from his past, hide from a future he did not want to enter? Sometimes we hide so well from everybody else that we end up hiding from ourselves, and then we cannot find our way out. That's one of many ways that we experience fear. Fear can get us lost quick.

Bruce Springsteen expresses this often, as when he sings:

I got God on my side,
and I'm just trying to survive.
But what if what you do to survive
kills the things you love?
Fear's a powerful thing.
It can turn your heart black, you can trust.
It'll take your God-filled soul
and fill it with devils and dust.⁴

What the younger son was doing in that pig field to survive was killing him. So often we feel that we get lost by being on the move. But sometimes, we can become lost by standing still, by letting the fear paralyze us, by feeling trapped.

C.S. Lewis once said: "If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort, you will get neither comfort nor truth, only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair."⁵

So when you find your life at a point where you are so lost: whether by ignorance or naiveté, whether by trying to hide or shaking with fear, whether trapped by your own bad choices or events that conspired against you, the question always is: *What now?* Luke says that the prodigal "came to himself." That can be a long journey, especially when you are so lost, but he "came to himself" and so could ask the question of his life: *What now?*

There is a booming cottage industry these days on the art and technique of apology. Elizabeth Bernstein of *The Wall Street Journal* has noticed this phenomenon and reports: "Along with helping people reconnect with old flames, childhood friends, and even long-lost relatives, the Internet is giving rise to a newer phenomenon: the decades-late apology. "The Web allows us to converse by email, a form of communication that often makes us braver and more impulsive—and occasionally even more thoughtful—about what we say. "There are even Web sites such as *ThePublicApology.com* and *PerfectApology.com*, dedicated to facilitating our quest for absolution."⁶

But the younger child's situation in the middle of that pig field was not one of

needing a better technique to apologize. His life was utterly broken. He was in every way lost. He needed to get home—and not just in a geographic sense—and he wasn't sure how to manage that. Besides—and this comes as no surprise to you—forgiveness is a complicated, messy, confusing business!

According to a recent survey, most Americans have a desire for more forgiveness in their lives, but they are more critical when choosing whom to forgive. Sixty-two percent of American adults said they need more forgiveness in their personal lives, and 94 percent wanted to see more forgiveness in the country. (That's interesting—apparently I'm to think *you* need more forgiveness than I do....) “Americans express a near-universal desire for a more loving and unified world.” Researchers found that even though the U.S. is composed of people who are usually forgiving, a majority of Americans also believe that forgiveness is conditional: sixty percent said, “Forgiving someone would first depend on the offender apologizing and making changes.”⁷

The text tells us that the hungry prodigal “came to himself.” He remembered who he really was, and immediately he also remembered his home. These two things always happen at the same time. When we are spent, out of resources, and confused and exposed, the Holy Spirit reminds us of our true identity; we remember who we really are.

Everyone in this parable is, at one point or another, in a panic. Things are not as they thought they would be. Life is not fitting together. But the panic is not rooted in trips or inheritance or squandered opportunities or fatted calves. The root of the panic is the temporary forgetting that we are all the beloved of God. When we forget that, we are lost, no matter how close to home we may be.

In a recent sermon on this text, Craig Barnes observed: “If you hang around pigs long enough, you get confused and start to act like a pig. But you are not a pig. You do not have to grab at life. Life has already been given to you. But you do have to return “home” in order to enjoy it. The prodigal has no mystical experience. He just looks up from a life he does not enjoy, and then he remembers his home. Then he comes to himself. There is no place else for him to go, so he starts down the road for home.”⁸

The prodigal heads for home, using the travel time to rehearse his lines when he arrives: “I’ll say, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” He does that so he will have a plan—we all want to have a plan, to be prepared. The prodigal’s plan is to be a hired hand. He is not planning on being forgiven and restored as a son. Maybe that is because he thinks he does not deserve such grace. Or, maybe it is because he does not want it. As long as he is a hired hand, he is still responsible for his own life. He will work for wages. He could get his act together, maybe save a little, and then leave again. As a hired hand, if he does not like his wages, he could complain or pull the other hired hands together and form a union. It is just a job, but he will get a better deal with the father than he had with the pigs. But his “plan” will not work. When it comes to the grace of God, there is no deal to be made. There is just grace. It simply flows out of the heart of God—ready or not.

So maybe we repent in stages. First we turn away from the distant country and come home because we are in trouble. Early on we try to make deals with God. “If you just get me out of this mess, I will _____ (fill in the blank)...I’ll do this for you, God.” But eventually, we come to realize that God will receive us only as a

beloved child. No one enters the Kingdom of God as a hired hand.⁹

It was a famine, not a drought, but in that lost, far country everything the younger son had used to get by in life was exposed. Every fake thing, every false pretense, every frail strategy and weak plan for living life on his own terms was laid bare as the utter failure it was. And that turned out to be one of the two best days of his life.

As Richard Rohr says, “God’s one-of-a-kind job description is that God actually uses our problems to lead us back to who we truly are made to become. God is the perfect Recycler, and in the economy of grace, nothing is wasted, not even our worst sins and our most stupid mistakes.”¹⁰

That’s a truth that the “prodigal son” learned in a very hard way. It’s a truth that would make a worthy letter for us to write to our 16-year-old selves, our 36-year-old selves, our 66-year-old selves, our 96-year-old selves...and every day in between.

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God will always lead us home—and embrace us, and rejoice!

Notes

1 Edwin H. Freidman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007).

2 Manny Fernandez, “As Drought Levels Drop, Texas Drought Reveals Secrets of the Deep,” *The New York Times*, November 30, 2011.

3 “Dear Me: 8 celebrities’ letters to themselves,” *The Week*, December 2, 2011.

4 Bruce Springsteen, “Devils and Dust,” *Sony*, 2005.

5 Cited in “Verse and Voice,” *SojoMail/Sojourners.org*, February 24, 2012.

6 Elizabeth Bernstein, “Who’s Sorry Now? Nearly Everyone,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 12, 2010.

7 “Craving Forgiveness, but Choosy in Giving It,” *Christian Century*, November 30, 2010.

8 Craig Barnes, “The Memory of the Father’s House,” preached at Shadyside Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, March 20, 2011.

9 Ibid.

10 Fr. Richard Rohr, “Shadowland,” Daily Meditation for March 8, 2012.