

Sermon: Notice the Famine

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

We all come to Scripture looking for meaning, but usually the meaning one person finds in Scripture is not the same as that found by someone else. Often, the meaning we take from Scripture depends on where we live and on our collective and not our individual experience. And sometimes, we've heard the story so many times, we take it for granted and stop wondering about it.

For example, some early Christian missionaries in Africa encountered resistance from the natives when they started talking about Jesus as a shepherd. The natives asked, 'Why does it have to be sheep? They're a nuisance! Why can't it be goats?'

Following Jesus the goatherd made sense to them but Jesus the shepherd did not.

Our lived experience colors how we hear and interpret Scripture. Today's passage from Luke provides a great example of how social location affects how we listen, which in turn affects how we make meaning in our own interpretations.

So, what's going on in the parable? We know the basic story: a man had two sons. The younger took his inheritance and went to a far country and blew it all, while the elder stayed home and worked the farm. The younger son came home, broke and hungry, expecting nothing more than the status of a hired hand. Instead, his father rejoiced and celebrated his return.

The first thing to notice in this story is the high degree of character development Luke gives to the father and the two sons. This is unusual for Luke, but it makes it easy for us to identify with any of the three.

It was also unusual for a father to divide his property prior to his death. And it was unusual for a son to ask for it. The Bible is clear on this point, according to the book of Sirach, which warns:

To son or wife, to brother or friend,
do not give power over yourself, as long as you live;
and do not give your property to another,

in case you change your mind and must ask for it.
While you are still alive and have breath in you,
do not let anyone take your place.
For it is better that your children should ask from you
than that you should look to the hand of your children.
Excel in all that you do;
bring no stain upon your honor. (Sirach 33:19-23)

King Lear learned this the hard way.

By asking for his inheritance early, it's possible that the younger son disgraced himself and dishonored his father. But the father, who loves his son and is apparently not concerned about his personal rights and honor, gave him his inheritance, which would equal about one third of the estate.

So off goes the young son to a far country and an uncertain future, perhaps not expecting to return; hence, he is 'dead' and 'lost' to his father.

Now, in our translation, the younger son 'squandered his property in *dissolute* living.' The King James translation says that he 'wasted his substance with *riotous* living.' Strictly speaking, Luke wrote that the young son was 'living loosely,' leaving open to discussion whether the son was living a wasteful life or just an unhealthy one. Luke's wording makes it sound as if the young son was merely foolish with his inheritance, and not wicked or degenerate. It makes me smile to speculate that he blew his cash on comic books and pizza, and that he merely lost his way in the big city.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the story, the elder son remains peeved at this 'son of his father' – he can't even acknowledge him as his brother – and he even makes a baseless accusation about how the younger son 'devoured' his father's property 'with prostitutes.' There's some unresolved tension surrounding the inheritance here.

Luke's audience might have compared this parable with the early church's split from Judaism. Jesus' audience might have heard that God never gives up on us. It turns out there are many ways people hear this parable, depending on where you live and on your collective history.

Mark Allan Powell is a New Testament professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. He once asked twelve of his students to read today's passage and then, from memory, retell the parable. Not one of them mentioned the famine in verse 14.

That got Powell thinking, so he organized a larger study involving 100 students. Only six mentioned the famine when they retold the story.

Now, these students were as diverse as you can get in terms of gender, race, age, economic status, and religious affiliation. The only thing they had in common was that they were all Americans. For them, the story was about a sinner who repents, putting the accent on *reform*. They gave the son's squandering a higher priority than the famine. In fact, removing the famine from the story made no material change in their reading at all.

Powell decided that the next logical step was to poll a group of non-American students, and his next chance to do that came while he was on sabbatical in St. Petersburg, Russia, formerly Leningrad. Out of fifty students, 42 mentioned the famine when they retold the story. Most of them made no mention of the boy squandering his money. Their focus was on the famine and on the father recovering his 'lost' and 'found' son, even though no one was looking for him. They put the story's accent on *recovery*.¹

Many Americans who grew up during the Great Depression developed habits of thrift and they learned how to make do or do without. My parents were and are like this. They were always ready for the proverbial rainy day. It's common sense. Those habits and behaviors of an entire generation filtered down to their children, to the extent that we now have a great national memory of the Depression and the Dust Bowl era, even though many of us never experienced it.

In the same way, many Russians carry with them a memory of several disastrous famines that killed millions upon millions of people. Unlike the famine in the parable, these famines were political in nature, first by the Soviet state in 1932-1933 in Ukraine, and then in 1941 by the Nazis in the siege of Leningrad, and again in Ukraine.

The psychological damage caused by these disasters, the American one of worrying about having enough money and the Russian one of not having any food at all, has persisted for almost ninety years and spans generations.

Talking about the young son in the parable, one of the Russian students told Powell, 'So what if he lost his inheritance? That just means he would be poor like everyone else. Most people don't have an inheritance to lose. But when the famine came, *that* was a problem.'

On the American side, in a time of want, it's a sin to throw money away. The famine made things worse, but it wasn't the boy's fault, so it gets ignored.

In socialist Russia, when Powell did his study, the sin was self-sufficiency: when the famine comes, you don't want to be alone.

In today's parable and in the parable immediately before it, Luke presents a theme of lost and found, of moral repentance versus a divine rescue.

Is the younger son remorseful when he returns home? We don't know. We just know what he plans to say to his father in his prepared speech, in which, in Greek, every sentence ends in 'you,' meaning the father. Is the son's repentance true or false, given his circumstances? The father doesn't care – he has his son back, safe and sound.

Repentance here is not indicated by fasting or mourning, but by a communal celebration for the son's return.

And even though the elder son refuses to receive his sibling as a brother, what matters to the father is the unity of the family and his concern for his sons.

The conflict between the brothers remains unresolved and it is probably related to the inheritance. Luke tends to leave things open and ambiguous with no easy answers, leaving it to us to fill in the blanks. But throughout his Gospel, he provides multiple stories of separation or estrangement, followed by repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, topping it off with Jesus and the disciples at the last supper.

What seems self-evident to us might confuse someone else. An American in Russia, ignorant of Russian history, might find the fixation on the famine a little odd. And a Russian visiting the U.S. might well wonder about our preoccupation with preserving wealth, knowing that money is useless when there's no food and you're starving to death. It's almost as if we're all reading a different book. We get so caught up in our own histories that we often miss a deeper meaning.

Which is the good news.

It's impossible to know *how* Jesus intended us to hear this parable, but *he had his reasons* for telling two parables in a row about being lost and the joy of being found.

Winston Churchill once said something like, 'Man will occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of the time he will pick himself up and continue on.' In his travels, Professor Powell stumbled upon a third interpretation that transcends social location.

Working in Tanzania once, he got about fifty local seminarians into one room and told them that he was going to read the parable aloud to them, and then ask one question, which was, ‘Why does the young man end up starving in the pigpen?’

Eighty percent of the class said it was because no one gave him anything to eat.

They reasoned that the boy was in a far country and that immigrants often lose their money. They don’t know how things work. They might not know that famines sometimes happen in that country. For the seminarians, the story wasn’t as much about repentance as it was about society’s responsibility to the strangers and aliens in its midst. They felt that no society should let a stranger go hungry and not give him anything to eat.

Specifically, for the Tanzanians, the parable is about the kingdom of God, and the teaching is this: the kingdom of God is a society that welcomes the undeserving. Seen in that light, the parable makes perfect sense. It explains why Jesus welcomes sinners and tax collectors to the Table and eats with them. It gives us hope that there is more meaning in Scripture than what we can see through the filters of our own experience. Jesus wants us to notice everything, and everything is important.

Amen.

¹ Powell, Mark Allan. *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap between Pulpit and Pew*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007, 14-27.