

RESTORING THE SOUL

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. W. Harvey Jenkins, Jr. on
Sunday, January 21, 2007 at Montevallo Presbyterian Church.

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 23

New Testament Reading: Luke 15:11-32

The Prodigal has become the epitome of someone who has "lost it", all the way down to his soul. When we hear this story and project it onto our mental screens, we are likely to picture a baby boomer claiming his inheritance, squandering it with moral abandon, and ending up penniless and homeless. However, the gospel is not finally about some guy living under the interstate. It's a good news story about a lost soul's homecoming.

So, instead of entitling this parable "The Prodigal", it seems fitting to borrow a title from historian Christopher Lasch and call it "The Recovery of Self-Respect." Or, better yet, we could take our cue from the psalmist, when he writes, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He restores my soul."

This morning, I'd like to explore Jesus' parable using a three-word outline -- "Prodigality, Credibility, Integrity". The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "prodigality" as "extravagance, or wastefulness". The younger son in the story wasted his inheritance and his life in extravagant living. Since we live "After Freud", we have come to assume along with his older brother that the young man's prodigality centered on sexual promiscuity. And in spite of living in a so-called sexually liberated society, sexual sins are often judged to be worse than sins like cheating, coveting, or being greedy.

Interestingly, in Christian tradition, sexual promiscuity doesn't even make the list of the top seven deadly sins." Applying a sexual component to prodigal's reckless living says at least as much about the older brother's fantasies and about our cultural obsessions as it does about the younger brother's activities. The point of the parable is that a young man wasted his life and lost his soul. How a person goes doing that doesn't much matter.

Looking at the story from a different angle, we might see the young man as "the ultimate consumer," living as if his resources were limitless. He represents the egocentric hedonism that has become the celebrated way of life in our society. Too bad for him that he lived before VISA or American Express and ran out of cash and pawnable goods before we would.

It has been said that we live in a culture whose patron saint is "The Prodigal." In our prodigal culture, six of the seven deadly sins are off the list of things sinful. In fact, they are lifted up as positive virtues. Greed, avarice, envy, gluttony, luxury, and pride are the very engines that drive our economy. Although we shudder to think of the way the prodigal ended up, our culture applauds the way he got there. Ironically, while blessing a prodigal lifestyle, our culture demands that we maintain **credibility**. "Credibility" means "worthy of belief". In our society, the question is not "Is it true or honorable or just?" but "Is it believable?"

During World War II, the Office of War Information published a handbook, which stated, "The only reason to suppress a piece of news is if it is unbelievable." The Nazi holocaust was not reported to the American public because it was too incredible to be believed. During the Watergate

investigation, then press secretary Ron Zeigler came to admit that his previous statements had become "inoperative". They were no longer believable. He would not admit that he had played fast and loose with the truth, only that his statements no longer had credibility.

President Bill Clinton denied his relationship with "that woman" until his denials could no longer be believed. **The Washington Post** recently exposed plans being pursued by some within the Bush administration to provide public disinformation regarding the war on terrorism. And, if you have ever watched **Court TV**, you will know that all too often both prosecutors and defense attorneys are more interested in establishing or attacking the credibility of witnesses than in ascertaining the truth or falsity of their testimony.

Public opinion is shaped not by facts, but by what is believable, like Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction." In our culture, truth and honesty take a back seat to credibility.

Having wasted his inheritance, the prodigal son lost his good credit rating and his credibility. It was incredible that a Jew would feed pigs -- and for a Gentile no less. Meanwhile, his older brother remained virtuous and credible.

When the younger son left home, the elder son received his inheritance also. He got the farm and the bulk of his father's estate. Although his inheritance was much larger inheritance than his younger brother's, it was not portable. It tied him to the farm. Little opportunity for him to be anything but a model son! His inheritance kept him home working like a Calvinist and keeping his credibility intact.

However, for Jesus, maintaining credibility is not nearly as important as is **integrity**. In Ken Follett's novel **A Dangerous Fortune**, banker Hugh Pilaster says, "(Integrity) means telling the truth, keeping promises, and taking responsibility for your mistakes.... It's a matter of being what you claim to be, doing what you say you'll do." While credibility has little to do with truth, integrity has everything to do with it. It means being true to yourself, being true to your word, being true to the ideals you profess.

Jesus was forever calling to task the most credible people of his day, the scribes and Pharisees. He said that God would hear prayers like, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!" But prayers of self-congratulation, like "Thank you, Lord, that I am not like that prodigal over there, that I am in good standing in the community and observe all the proper rituals," would be ignored.

God can do something with a person of integrity who cries out, "Lord, I have sinned" or "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!" But what can anyone do with those self-righteous folks who are unaware of their prodigal sides.

Two sons received their inheritances-- one became a prodigal, the other remained credible. The prodigal demanded his inheritance early and used it to get as far away from home as he could. He lived it up until his inheritance was gone and his soul was used up. Without resources, he hired himself out to feed pigs, until the day "he came to himself." Remembering how good his father's farmhands had it, he decided to go home, admit his folly, and beg his father to hire him at minimum wage.

There's integrity in coming to know the truth about yourself. There's integrity in accepting responsibility for your mistakes. There's integrity in accepting help when you need it. In

Shakespeare's memorable words, "Know thyself and thou canst not be false to anyone".

Looking back, we see that the younger son had possessed a certain integrity all along. He had been straight with his father about what he wanted. He wanted his inheritance and he wanted it NOW, like many in our culture where immediate gratification is considered an entitlement! He wanted to leave home and pursue his dreams. Like most prodigals, the young man in the parable didn't start out to get lost or to lose his soul. As long as he had the wherewithal, his consumptuous lifestyle was acceptable and applauded by his friends and acquaintances. But when his inheritance ran out, so did his friends. And only when he hit bottom did he come to himself and admit his folly -- first to himself and then to his father: "I have sinned ...and am no longer worthy to be called your son."

Consider the contrast between that kind of integrity and the credibility of his brother. The difference got itself played out during the welcome home party. The credible son comes in from the fields and discovers a party being given in honor of his brother's return. He refuses to have anything to do with it. He stays outside pouting, nursing his anger and jealousy. His father comes out to bring him in, but he self-righteously declares, "No way! That son of yours went off and partied while I stayed home all these years and worked like a slave for you."

Excuse me!?! **Who** did he stay home and work for? The farm was his, so in truth he was working all those years for **himself**. He may have been a good old boy in his own eyes, but he wasn't being straight when he said, "All these years, I have served you and obeyed you, and you never gave me a party." He may never have left home, but he was as far away from his father in spirit as his younger brother was in geography. He had his own kind of prodigality. He wasted his life grudgingly doing his duty -- maintaining his credibility, but failing to be true to himself or to his father.

As most commentators point out, the central character in this story is not the prodigal, nor is it his elder brother. It is the waiting father. The story begins, "There was a man who had two sons...." It ends with the father's statement -- "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life." He wanted both of his sons to come to themselves, to own up to the truth, and to become persons of integrity.

When he saw his younger son coming down the road, the waiting father "ran out to welcome him" even when he was still a long way off. When his elder son sulked outside the house, his father went out to find him and pleaded with him to join the party. The bottom line is this -- God is eager to forgive our prodigality no matter what form it takes. God puts no stock in our credibility, but expects us to become persons of integrity.

Many times, you and I fall short of meeting God's expectations. But when we "come to ourselves" and head back to where God is waiting, we discover God coming to meet us. And in God's welcoming embrace, our souls are restored.