

'Did God intend Death?' (Lk. 15:11-32)

Dr Bethany Sollereeder

Father in Heaven, thank you for the gift of words. For your Word to us and for the space our words create to point us on to you. Bless the words I will share and the words spoken silently in the hearts and minds of those who listen, and may your Word find life in us. Amen.

'Father, I wish you were dead.' These are not, precisely, the words the son used when he asked his father for his share of the family estate. But they might as well have been. To ask for an inheritance of his father was to say, 'I would rather have cold hard cash than more years with you.'

Surprisingly, and in a much-critiqued move, the father does precisely what his son asks. Instead of giving him a *watchen*, sending him back out to the fields, and seriously considering how to re-write his will, the father divides his property between his sons and gives them what is theirs. The father in this parable begins by legally, if not physically, dying.

The younger son, already established as a rogue of a man, unsurprisingly heads off into the horizon where, 'being now free from all restraint, his life [is] a life of idleness and dissipation.' The money runs out, a famine hits the land he is in, and he is left hungry. He must have been very hungry indeed to take a job caring for unclean pigs, and truly starving to think of eating their fare.

Now, let's pause in this story for a moment and consider the context. Jesus tells this

parable as part of a series of three parables in Luke 15. There is the parable of the lost sheep, where the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to search after the one stray, then there is the lost coin, where the woman diligently searches her house, lighting lamps and sweeping under the furniture, until she finds what was lost. In both of these the protagonist actively searches for the lost object, spares no effort until what is lost is found; what has wandered is returned. In this parable, though, the father does nothing. He would have known how his son would spend the money, he would have known that the money would not long last. He probably could have made a fairly good estimate of when his son would become desperate. But the father does not search for the son, even once he could have guessed that his son needed help. There is no search and rescue party as there was with the coin and sheep. Why?

In Eleonore Stump's book, *Wandering in Darkness*, she introduces a concept she calls 'self-willed loneliness.' It is, to paraphrase, the self-isolation that results from an identity fragmented by sin or shame. How can I explain this simply? If someone locks themselves in a room, you can break down the door and pull them out. If someone locks themselves inside their own pride or shame or grief, any forceful attempt to draw them out will only damage the very person you are trying to help. When the inner self lacks integrity it is only the power of persuasion that can be of any use, while power itself is powerless.

The very nature of love is that it seeks the good of the beloved. It seeks the flourishing

of the beloved, and therefore the integration of the inner self. Love both sees and respects the limits of that inner self, and therefore love cannot coerce the other. It can only wait for the person to turn internally, to seek his or her own good. Once the person has turned (or repented), and seeks help, then all sorts of things may be done, but until that point, all the love in the world is helpless before self-willed loneliness. And this is why, I think, the father does send a rescue party for the son. Until the son is ready to return (and we will talk about the nature of that return in a moment) the father's loving pursuit could only drive the son further away. So the father takes instead the much more painful path of love-filled active inaction. Also known as waiting. He has to acknowledge that the outcome of his son's wellbeing, and thus of his own wellbeing in so far as his love links him to his son, is in his son's hands. The father's waiting is not a sign of his indifference, but of how very great his love actually is. W. H. Vanstone has wisely written, 'The external restraint which love practices is often a mark of its freedom from internal limit.'

The same, I think, is true of God. When we see the violence and the ills that plague the world, we can think, 'Where is God? Why doesn't the loving Father do something? Drag a few prodigals home and straighten them out!' I think any answer to that question must start with this: the very nature of love involves an inescapable vulnerability and even helplessness. Even omnipotence cannot overcome self-willed loneliness because the question is not one of force but of identity and reintegration of the self.

OK, let's get back to the story. The son is with the pigs, the father has not come seeking him. And now, the account tells us, he 'comes to himself' and decides to go back to his father to ask for food and work. He composes a speech, '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 has reintegrated himself at least enough to be looking for help. What is unclear is whether his repentance is genuine or not. The majority of commentators take it as genuine, and so narrate one of the most touching reunion stories of all time: contrite confession meets uncalculating grace. However, a minority of voices see something else. I was surprised to find that many of them did not consider the son's confession to be genuine. Take note that the Father runs to meet the son and embraces him long before the son has had a chance to make his confession. In other words, when the father offers his whole-hearted welcome, he has no idea whether the son has repented or has come simply to sponge off the remainder of what the father owns.

Now, while I was preparing this talk, I couldn't help making links between this most famous of biblical prodigals and the most infamous of prodigals in English literature. I speak of course, of the great scoundrel Mr Wickham from Jane Austen's, *Pride and Prejudice*. Like the biblical prodigal, he had a loving father figure in the late Mr Darcy, and like the biblical prodigal, he demanded his whole living up front in cash rather than to inhabit the living that his adopted father wished to give him. And finally, he too spent all he had in loose

living. So much so that when I spoke a minute ago about the prodigal son being 'free from all restraint' and living in 'idleness and dissipation' I was actually quoting from Austen. Now, there are several times when Mr. Wickham returns, but I want to focus on the last time he returns to the Bennett's household. You will remember this is just after he ran away with the youngest daughter, initially refused to marry her, and nearly brought the family to utter ruin. The prodigal Mr Wickham returns and there is only one character that acts like the father of the prodigal son, only one who keeps no record of wrong. I'm going to read the account:

'They came. The family were assembled in the breakfast room to receive them. Smiles decked the face of Mrs. Bennet as the carriage drove up to the door; her husband looked impenetrably grave; her daughters, alarmed, anxious, uneasy. Lydia's voice was heard in the vestibule; the door was thrown open, and she ran into the room. Her mother stepped forwards, embraced her, and welcomed her with rapture; gave her hand, with an affectionate smile, to Wickham, who followed his lady...'

If there had been a fatted calf available, I suspect that Mrs Bennett would have killed it. Of all the characters in Jane Austen's colourful book, it is the silly, impossible Mrs Bennett who acts most like the Father. I'm pretty sure that every essay possible has been written on *Pride and Prejudice*, but let me suggest a what is very possibly a new essay title: 'Mrs. Bennett: Model of Divine Grace.'

'No, no!' You cry! 'This isn't right! Mrs. Bennett lacks all judgement! If she was only less silly she would join the rest of the family in their reservation, or even with Mr. Collins in his refusal to receive them at all!'

'Yes,' I reply, 'if only the father of the prodigal was less silly he would have seen that the proper thing to do with the son who brought shame and scandal on the family was to act like the older brother, refuse to receive him and certainly refuse to entertain him.'

To be entirely honest, I do think there is a difference between Mrs Bennett and the father in our parable. Mrs. Bennett has not forgiven and forgotten, she has simply forgotten. Her grace is cheap grace, though in a culture like our where one has to fight for the 'right to be forgotten' even her sort of grace is rare these days. But what I think Mrs Bennett does is restore the scandal of this story. Before the son repented, before he showed any contrition, the father ran to him. The father did not bother to investigate whether the son's repentance and confession were genuine or not. He did not wait to see that he son was planning on being repentant. The father ran to him and treated him as exactly what he was: his beloved son. That offended sensibility we feel at Mrs Bennett's rapturous welcome of Lydia and Mr Wickham, those who betrayed her, is precisely what the older brother felt at his father's reaction. It was probably what the servants and townspeople felt as well: 'A little reserve! A little dignity, please! Make them feel the seriousness of what they have done!' But the father will have none of it. He jumps straight to acceptance and throws a wild party.

The commentators will no doubt continue to argue over whether the son's conversion was genuine or not. But I don't think it matters. Whether the confession was genuine or whether it was a political move, the father's reaction is the same: he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. And so it is with God. When we turn to God away from our self-willed loneliness, we do not find long moralistic lectures and the careful reserve of one who has been hurt – crucified, actually. One step towards God and we find the door thrown open, the ready embrace, the full-on party. When it comes to sons and daughters coming home, God has no proper pride.