

**Sermon: March 6, 2016 - Lent IV Luke 15:11-32**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

In my opinion, the parable of the Prodigal Son is an all-world, all-time great story. In such a short story, the characters are so well-drawn: the younger son, living the high life then crawling back home; the older son, dutifully and resentfully working the farm; the father, heartbroken at losing a son then rejoicing well beyond what was deemed proper, at his return.

The arc of its story is simple but emotionally charged; we can see aspects of ourselves in each character, whether that character is unsettlingly close to our behaviour, or a mirror in which we see our response to that character. And perhaps my favourite aspect of the story is the way that it plays with what we tend to celebrate and what we tend to deride, reminding us that the most admirable behaviours have a shadow side, and the most lamentable behaviours often have within them an attempt to achieve something good.

Occasionally when preparing for Sundays my reading will lead me to someone whose words say something I really needed to hear. This week, I experienced that in an essay by an author named Debie Thomas. Her reflection on this parable took the form of two letters: one, to the boy who ran; one, to the boy who stayed. And while many of us may find ourselves closer to the heart of the dutiful elder son who stayed behind and then struggled to be gracious amidst the fuss over his brother's return, I was most deeply drawn to Debie's letter to the boy who ran, which I share with you now.

**To the Boy Who Ran:**

I begin with you, because you're the strangest and least accessible to me. Impetuous. Careless. Demanding. So selfish, you take my breath away.

On the face of things, you and I have nothing in common. I've never run away, or squandered an inheritance, or broken my parents' hearts. Neither have I felt the ardent, tear-soaked embrace of a lovesick father — human or divine — welcoming me home.

Maybe this is why I dislike you. Am I envious because God is generous? Am I hurt because the Father's love is a wild, unfettered thing, unpredictable and unfair? Yes, I am.

YES. I AM.

I wish I knew for sure that your penitence was genuine. I wish I had a guarantee that you understood — not just in your head but with your whole heart — just how much fear, destruction and sorrow you caused. I'm okay with forgiving you, but only if you're sorry beyond language. Only if you bleed repentance.

I also wish I knew for sure that you pulled your act together, once the party was over and the fatted calf was eaten. Did you get up early the next morning and pull your weight in the fields? Did you apologize to your brother, or ask after the health of your Father? Did you humble yourself, and make peace with the villagers? Did you understand that really, there could be no such thing as going home? Not in any simple way? Everything — *everything* — would have to change.

This is a problem, of course — my lack of charity. I want to accuse you of having no empathy — of not [giving one single care] about how you ripped your Father's heart out of his chest — but here I am, completely uninterested in empathizing with you. I grew up in the Church, a quiet Good Kid in my Father's shadow. I don't have a dramatic conversion story like yours. What could you possibly have to teach me?

"Dying of hunger." That's how your story describes your final days in that far-off country. When your costly adventure was over, when your funds ran dry, when your so-called friends abandoned you. There among the pigs, covered in filth, you finally realized who and what you were. "*Dying of hunger.*" May I give you a new label? A new name? One that I can relate to? Aren't you, at the very core, The Hungry One?

It was hunger, wasn't it, that first lured you away from a good life and a good Father? A gluttonous hunger, maybe, but hunger still. For freedom? Self-expression? Meaning? Peace? Something in you — something wild and insistent — needed feeding, and your Father, in his vast, unorthodox wisdom, understood. Your Father *ran* to welcome you. He cared for nothing in this world so much as having you safe and snug in his arms. No matter what the preachers say, this is not everyone's visceral experience. To hear we are loved is one thing. To feel ourselves embraced is another.

There's so little of your experience I can relate to, much less applaud. Despite my best attempts to reconcile my heart with yours, my envy remains. But at least you and I have this in common: I know what it's like to hunger. To hunger for love, for depth, for passion, for joy. And I know what it's like to imagine an exotic Elsewhere, a more perfect nourishment miles away from my Father's all-too-familiar table. I know what it's like to "come to myself" in the broken, impoverished places of my own foolish fashioning, and to long for the warmth and sustenance of a home.

Was it admirable, what you did? I don't know. But there is this: even though it cost you, even though it wounded your family, you honored your hunger. I can't speak to the rightness or wrongness of your decision — I dare not — but maybe there is something in your story I should attend to. I usually ignore my hunger. When I can't ignore it, I hide, minimize, and vilify it. Is there a chance my hunger wants to point me to God?

Some day I will share with you Debie's letter to "The Boy Who Stayed" for it, too, is very good. But in order to avoid preaching a half dozen sermons — which is ALWAYS the temptation with the parable of the prodigal son — I want to hone in on two of her points about the son who wasted his inheritance and headed, humiliated, for home.

The first point I want to explore is Debie's closing point, which I find troubling, curious and brilliant, all at once: that it may be our hunger, our yearning amid emptiness, that points us toward God. The prodigal son's hunger for a life other than the one he was living, caused him to leave. At some level, leaving home is necessary for our growth to independence and adulthood, whether that move takes us across the street or around the world. Some of you are far away from the place you called home in childhood or in your prime earning years, and a number of you have children and grandchildren living in other continents, let alone a province or two away. In order to satisfy a healthy hunger for a meaningful vocation, in order to stretch our wings and take the risk of flight we have found it necessary to leave the nest, go out into the world and take it all in: the humdrum and the risky, the extraordinary and the ordinary. So when Debie asks, "is there a chance my hunger wants to point me to God?" The answer is yes. Yes, our hunger to take in all that life has to offer, to stretch beyond the script we thought was written for our lives does point us toward the Divine.

But it goes beyond that, doesn't it? In addition to those healthy journeys that we make away from home, it is also true that even within some of our most negative behaviours — compulsions, addictions, obsessions, driven-ness and inflexibility — we are seeking, desperately, for a deeper meaning that call fill our personal emptiness. We correctly see holes, gaps, emptiness, and we know that SOMETHING should be there — and then find a really destructive way to try to fill the emptiness, to feed the hunger. It may be a gap that's been there since childhood, it may be something that arose along the way, but one way or another there is a void that needs filling.

And sometimes, as we stagger along a destructive path searching for that which can satisfy this deep hunger, we arrive at the place that the prodigal son arrived: a place where nothing but home, nothing but the embrace of a loving parent will do. Whether you envision that as a big hug from Mom or Dad, as a the full cosmic embrace from our Divine source and destination, or simply as an acknowledgement that I cannot do this on my own any more, coming to our senses and finding that safe, life-affirming place that is truly our heart's "home" answers a universal hunger that lives in all of us.

I thank Debi Thomas for bringing that forward, reminding me to pay attention to my hungers and what I can learn as I seek healthy ways to address them. And I also thank her for the second point I'm going to pick up: showing me the ways that my story and the wild-living son's story are reasonably similar, much as I want to imagine that he and I have nothing in common.

She asks this question of The Boy Who Ran: "May I give you a new label? A new name? One that I can relate to? Aren't you, at the very core, **The Hungry One?**" With those words, Debie names one of the core questions of my life and, I think, the life that Christ calls us to live: What do I hunger for? What do we hunger for?

Through a variety of means, many of us have come face-to-face with our hungers. As already alluded to, some of us face our hungers through the world of addictions, either our own unmanageable behaviours or our responses to the acting-out of someone we love. For some of us, delving deep into our childhood and revisiting the rules of our family of origin uncovers hungers we are still trying to satiate. Some of us have to literally "deal with our hungers" and our relationship with food, whether that takes the form of over-eating, anorexia, bulimia, or more generalized unhealthy thoughts and practices regarding the fuel we take into our bodies.

And then there is this: within our collective story of faith there is a yearning, a hunger for that which is already-but-not yet. The Hebrew people, in their wandering, longed for a land of milk and honey which had been promised them; Christians, with our scriptural traditions of harvest, second coming, new creation, anticipate with faith and hope something that is not yet in our possession but whose taste is on our lips. God places within us this "horizon of hunger" that motivates us in our journey of discipleship. And yet this hunger for justice, is balanced by a more basic, human hunger – a hunger of envy, or jealousy.

We live in a world whose economic realities passed "sinful" long ago. Last October, Credit Suisse declared that the richest 1% of the world's population now owns 50% of its total wealth, and the top one-third of those (0.36%) each have a net worth of more than \$50 million. Meanwhile, 71% of the world's adult population have a net worth under \$10,000, some far, far below that line. In another report issued that same month, USA Today noted that the 100 largest US CEO retirement packages average \$49.3 million, while 31% of the bottom economic group of US families have nothing saved for retirement.

What hunger gets aroused in us when we hear those numbers? What is our base-line, gut-level response? For me it goes something like this: there is an initial wave of sorrow mixed with anger that there are starving people in the world when some live in such opulence, but that is followed almost immediately by a quick, "hey, what about me?!?" And every time I hear about someone receiving vast sums of money, whether it's in the world of business or sports or entertainment, I have the same response. A major league baseball pitcher signs a contract for \$31Million per season, or just under \$1Million per game, and before my mind can even finish saying "what about the displaced, injured and starving people in Haiti" I'm already crying the blues about my retirement nest-egg, or meagerness thereof.

We have this combined hunger – a hunger of self-concern, for a life of comfort, ease, perhaps even luxury – and a bigger, God-given hunger, for a world where everyone has enough. I

cannot for a moment sit in judgement of the younger son, who cashed in his inheritance early in order to party hardy, because part of me would love to have gone the places he went and experienced the things he experienced. And yet – and yet – when I still myself for a moment, **when I come to my senses**, I realize that the eyes of Jesus are upon me as he tells this story, and when I realize *that* I embrace the goodness and absolute fulfillment of Christ's promised realm of shalom.

Deeper than my desire for a bigger slice of the pie, I do hunger for a world where nobody has to sleep in a tent in a refugee camp, or huddled together six-to-a-room in a foreign land. I do hunger for a world where a child's chances in the world are completely unrelated to the colour of their skin, the latitude of their nation or whether their chromosomes say XX or XY. I do yearn for a world where reconciliation is more important than protecting the status quo, a world where there is greater fairness and decency in the distribution of wealth. And if I really let myself be changed by this story and its storyteller, I will even learn to say that I hunger for a world that allows for second chances and celebrates when the lost ones return home. I am so thankful for the stories of promises of Jesus, that give me this broader lens on the world.

In this story, we are shown the younger son's thoughtless excess, and the older son's grumbling restraint. We are shown the wild wanderings of the younger and the stoic responsibility of the elder. We are shown the disappointment of the parent when there is estrangement, and the banquet of joy when there is reunion. And in all of it, Christ encourages us to be aware of the realities of our lives – the hungers that drive our choices - and to infuse them with his greater promises of life in abundance, FOR ALL. Christ calls us to look around at where our journey has taken us, to be willing to change course in little ways and big ways, and to start heading for home. May our yearning and wandering, our path and our hunger, lead us to the heart of God. Amen.

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