

WEEKLY REFLECTION

Lent 4C, 2022, Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

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The father and his two sons: dysfunction and reconciliation

Introduction

Over hundreds of years of use, this parable about the father his lost son and the elder brother has itself been lost to its original range of meanings. There is no mention of a *prodigal* youngest son in the Greek! Rather it suggests that the extravagant waste of the money is living “without any thought of future consequences”. It reflects a deeply tragic and hopeless situation, as “*asostos*” actually means “unsaveable”. This parable has echoes in this parable to Dante’s poem *Inferno*: In that distant country the dark wood fell before him. Let’s take a journey into the parable through Dante’s *Inferno* and to find ourselves in the parable and then into our own spiritual journey!

1. When the dark wood fell before me

In the middle of the journey of *our* life
I found myself in a dark wood,
for I had wandered from the straight and true.

Ah, how hard a thing it is to tell about
of that wood, savage and harsh and dense,
the thought of which renews my fear!

So bitter it is that death is hardly more.
But to reveal the good that came to me there
I will tell of the other things I saw there.

How I entered there, I can’t bring to mind,
I was so full of sleep at that moment
when I left the way of truth behind.

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto One, lines 1-12.

Albert Durer, 1496, Young son
among the swine



These are the first verses of the first Canto, or song, of the 14th century poem written by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri.

Dante’s *Divine Comedy, Inferno*, presents a narrator who travels through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise.¹ Richard Rohr, a Franciscan Priest and a leading Enneagram spiritual director, writes that:

The work is structured as a spiritual journey. As Dante led us into the *Inferno* – into hell, into illusion, into darkness – he illustrated all the capital sins in the various levels of hell.

... Dante doesn’t have God torturing anybody ... or kicking people into the pit. Rather, Rohr suggests, irresponsible human actions, such as pride, injustice, create their own punishment, anguish and hell. Dante suggests, Rohr writes, “that people choose

¹ Richard Rohr, *Discovering the Enneagram*, p 71.

their death, while God is asking us to choose life, he is saying: I am trying to call you beyond death to love.”²

Dante’s aim is to encourage readers and communities to undertake their own spiritual journey by sharing an imaginary journey. In this discovery process the pilgrim “wakes” up to learn he is lost to the truth; and that it is only in the journey that he comes to find himself, God and to really know the world around him.

For Dante such a journey raises the question of politics:

How do the claims of justice go along with the realities of passions and ... the collision of conflicting desires, conflicting parties and so on?

But also, Dante is concerned with ethics, agency, the freedom to address issues and express love.

We all know we should do what is good and right, for ourselves, others and society, but due to the weakness of the will we find ourselves acting and living in contradiction to the good.

Ethics and politics pose the real question about “who am I” and “what am I doing”, in order to come to some kind of understanding of the world around myself.

Dante is lost in a landscape that is terrifying: “I came to myself in a dark wood.” The decision he made having “wandered from the straight and true” lead him into a distant place of darkness:

How I entered there, I can’t bring to mind,
I was so full of sleep at that moment
when I left the way of truth behind.

He was asleep in life, a spiritual, social, ethical and political unawareness, in a dark wood. But when he says “I came to myself”, he now realises he must pursue a different path to recover himself, life and a different view of God.

2. The parable of the father and his two sons: dysfunction and reconciliation

Like Dante’ *Inferno*, the parables of Jesus are creative stories, filled with conflicted characters, exaggerations and images, which we enter, journey in, and then leave with a different view of ourselves, life and God. The coin, the lost sheep, or as in our parable today, a Jewish family, each are used to play out life’s contradictions, challenges, ethics, politics, spirituality and a new way of life.

The Greek word that invited the use of the word, *prodigal*, would have been “scattering” (*diaskorpizo*), suggesting the extravagant waste of the money, and the word “*asotos*” suggesting, “without any thought of future consequences”. And here is a silent metaphor expressing the deeply tragic and hopeless situation, as “*asotos*” actually means “unsaveable”.

These two terms, “scattering” and “unsaveable” relate to the state of the young son who represents personalities who seek adventure, pleasure and their own interests, yet unknowingly engaging in the waste of resources, including human power and responsibility, with disastrous consequences, unseen to themselves. We could apply Dante’s lines to his situation: In that distant country the dark wood fell before him.

How I entered there, I can’t bring to mind,
I was so full of sleep at that moment
when I left the way of truth behind.

The younger son left the way of truth and ethics, or the way of the common good. In ancient Jewish society, the familial, economic and social requirements for ethical conduct of sons was that resources remained in the family until the father died, to

² Richard Rohr, *The Enneagram 2*, p 11.

ensure economic security. The younger son represents those who live only for themselves. He is spiritually, socially, economically and humanely asleep! This character lives unknowingly wishing his father were dead.

However, all three characters are complicit in their own way in the extravagant waste of resources, including human power and responsibility. Barbara Taylor Brown titles the parable, *The parable of the dysfunctional family*. The elder son represents the dutiful, responsible type of personality who, in his resentment of the father's welcome of the younger son. The elder son creates the false story that he engaged in sexual exploits. Envy overwhelms his judgements.

In this caricature of a Jewish family, we could again use Dante's words for the younger son's situation.

In the middle of the journey of *our* life

I found myself in a dark wood ...

That is, that the younger son is in the middle of the journey of our life, the systemic life of a family, in a dark wood, and why? Brown implicates the father by asking, why did the father allow the son to take his inheritance without dialogue and strong discussion?

Yet, the surprising and overwhelming theme is that compassion seeks expression in this story, even when the family is dysfunctional. It alone enables reconciliation and encouragement to change.

3. Beyond dysfunction: expressions of love and reconciliation

Joan Chittister suggests that this parable invites us to identify and own how we express these three types of character at different times: 1. the squandering one, in a distant country in a dark wood; 2. The judgemental one, holding to our fixed views and envious; or 3. Caring, mature, open to the other, deeply compassionate, reconciling, just and sharing power.

Chittister writes:

"Down deep we know that we are a spiritual jumble of all three breeds -- the loving parent, the spiritually adolescent, the demanding critic."

For me, differently to Chittister, the parent equally has his dark, challenged side; collection and holding to resources, patriarchy, then too easily allows youngest to get



his way.

This parable invites us to discover the full truth about ourselves: that we are divided selves; that we can discover our empowered self, which, empowered by God, to use Chittister's words:

"accepts that life is a progression of struggles meant to be endured, a succession of stumblings from which we are meant to learn, a cycle of events meant to be drained of every insight, every glory that life has to give. This is the part of us that calls us beyond ourselves to perfect love for the rest of the world that is just as stumbling and just as sincere as we are.

We are each the child who is squandering the treasure called life.

We are each the child who is judging those who do not do life as we do.

We are each called to be the one who forgives the stumbling self and celebrates the efforts of the other. We have no proof that the erring child reformed and stayed home. We only know that this child tried to begin again and that the

trying itself was enough for the loving parent. We have no surety that the perfect child ever escaped the imperfection of jealous perfection. We have no proof that the parent was not stung time and again by both of them.

We only know that the parent understood the struggles -- and forgave them.

Conclusion

This parable invites us to engage in a spiritual journey to discover the deep truth about ourselves; the truth that we are divided selves; that our families and communities are divided social entities; that we are invited to take the adventure to discover these aspects of ourselves, families and communities to adventure into new ways of missional being.

As Ephesians 4: 22-24 says:

You must give up your old way of life, you must put aside your old self which gets corrupted by following illusory desires. Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution. So you can put on a new self that has been created in God's way...

This is written for Christians, for churches, for families.

The wisdom of the Enneagram is one personality and spiritual assessment that enables us to discern how we live divided lives.

Three Enneagram types relate to our parable:

Eldest child	Type One principled, purposeful, self-controlled, and perfectionistic.
Parental	Type Two is demonstrative, generous, people-pleasing, and possessive.
Youngest child	Type Seven is spontaneous, versatile, distractible, and scattered.