



# The Trinity Pulpit

## Summer Short Stories

### In a Land Far, Far Away

Luke 15:11-22

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June 20, 2010



Every good story has a good opening line. They usually begin with something like “once upon a time” or “in a galaxy far, far away.” Good novels have memorable lines like “it was the best of time and it was the worst of times.” Every good story has what a songwriter would call “the hook.” It is the line that catches you and will not let you go. If I were going to give this title to this parable today it would be “in a land far, far away.” This is a story about one son who literally went to a distant land but returned home, while another son never traveled an inch, however is left at the end of the story in a land far, far away.

Jesus was a master storyteller. He had the ability to turn a phrase, drive a point home and sometimes leave you hanging in a story so you could not simply hear it and forget it, but you had to go home pondering the story. No wonder they said Jesus teaches differently than the others. He teaches with authority.

As we begin our series on “short stories of Jesus”, I think it to be appropriate to start with a very familiar story. The story of the Prodigal Son along with the Good Samaritan might be the two most familiar parables of Jesus. This is a story of family, love, grace, compassion, rebellion, jealousy, freedom, bondage, sin and redemption. No wonder it is a story that still intrigues us. The setting is an audience filled with “sinners”, that is those whom society has deemed unworthy of God’s love, and the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. In this story everyone in Jesus’ audience finds themselves. It is true that a parable of Jesus must be understood in its context. We must understand the ongoing narrative between Jesus and the first listeners. Yet, the parables of Jesus transcend that moment. The parables of Jesus are stories that Jesus has released into our world and the sto-

ries have been told and retold and passed down to listeners far removed from the original setting and narrative. Yet, because these are the stories of Jesus, they hold the same power to transform as they did when they were first spoken.

Like the first listeners, we too hear this story and find our selves in the characters in the story. Like every story there are some characters that we long to be, but we might be fooling ourselves and discover that no I am not that character, I am this one instead. It is just like every good super hero story. We all want to be Batman rather than Robin. We all want to be Superman and not reporter Jimmy. Who wants to be the sidekick? However when we are honest with ourselves, we might find our self in another character in the story besides the one that everyone wants to be.

Helmut Thielicke tells the story of a baby being placed in front of a mirror. At first the baby just does not pay attention to her own reflection. They might be intrigued by what they see, but it does not dawn on them that it is their reflection in the mirror. Then there comes a day you can see it in their eyes and expression when the realization comes. “Hey, wait a minute that is me!” Who is that character in this familiar story for you today? Which one makes you come to the conclusion “that is me.”

There was a father who had two sons. The youngest son decided that he wanted to experience life outside the father’s household. Maybe he had heard stories of far away places. Maybe some of his father’s servants were “not from around here” and had told of their adventures before they had arrived as servants at their Father’s house. Whatever the case, the younger son came to a conclusion that the Father’s house was not freedom, but bondage and he needed to be free. So, he made his request and asked the Father for his inheritance. Some say this was a callous request. To ask for your inheritance



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before the death of the Father was essentially to say I wish you were dead. Others say no it was his for the asking and he simply wanted what was coming to him. The Father who even in the beginning is pictured as loving, giving and gracious gives the son what is requested. It did not take long for the son to give legs to his dreams and soon he is packed up and on his way to a distant country. The very fact he goes a distance is a sign of his determination to be on his own, make his own decisions, and have his own way. Nothing will be his own authority except his own desires. Little does he know that we are always a servant to something or someone even if it is to our own desire.

The son waste no time exercising his new found freedom. He lives extravagantly with great self indulgence in what the NIV describes as “wild living.” The term in the Greek suggests living that is beyond one’s means and with no regard for the future. It is the eat, drink and party today for tomorrow we die attitude to life. It is to live life shortsighted. The son quickly discovers that his new found freedom brings him an unforeseen bondage. When he had spent everything he had there was a famine in the far away country and he began to be in need.

Don’t miss that statement. Everything was going well in his new lifestyle until the unexpected came. It was not in the moment of extravagant living he found himself in need of, it was when the unexpected came and he was not prepared that he began to be in need. The famine revealed his nature. The crisis caused the truth of this life to become evident. He just was not ready for a crisis, however crises came.

The next picture is the scene of destitution. The son who was once privileged in the Father’s house finds himself as a servant. Not just a servant, but a servant doing the work that was viewed as a curse for a Jewish boy. He was herding swine. He had lost his place in a household, he had lost his dignity, and he had lost his so called friends. In fact Jesus says “no one gave him anything.” The far country that had been so hospitable when he had money to spend now showed him no hospitality when he was in need. In that moment he truly was in a land far, far away.

Then he comes to his senses. He has a moment of clarity. He sees how his so called freedom has brought him true bondage. He finds himself in a prison of his own creation. In that moment I wonder if the word that came to his mind was “what if?” What if I could go home? What if the Father would let me back in the household, not as a child that would be too much to ask, but at least as a servant? Even my Father’s servants have it better than me. So he gets up and makes his way back to the

Father’s household. It is on his way home that the great picture of a father’s love is displayed. When the Father sees him coming he runs from the house to meet the son. Before the son can begin his speech of contrition the Father hugs him, kisses him and begins the process of restoration. He puts a robe on his son, he puts shoes on his son, he puts a ring on his hand all of this to identify who he is in the household. The Father is not looking for servants the Father is in need of children! The Father declares that this is a day of celebration and he will spare no expense in the celebration of his son’s return.

However, that is not how the story ends. There is another son. We are drawn back to the beginning of the story. A father had two sons... o yeah. There were two. The elder son had stayed behind. The elder son had continued to work in the fields and care for the household of the father. The elder son had been the responsible one. The elder son had heard the others around the fields talk about the younger son’s boldness, adventurous spirit and how many of them wish they had the courage to strike out on their own. All the while the elder son remained by his father’s side. The elder son appears to be the one we all want to be. He is the one who is planning for the future, being responsible, and a hard worker. He is the one who seems to have his heart in the right place. However, looks can be deceiving.

Just as the crisis of the famine revealed the truth about the life of the young son, the celebration of the younger son’s return reveals the heart of the elder son. When the elder son hears the music and the sounds of the party and hears that it is for the younger son, his response is anything but gracious. He tells the father essentially “how dare you.” How dare you use our resources for one who has no regard for our resources? How can you throw him a party after what he has done? I am the one who stayed and worked, in fact I slaved for you. Yet, you have never given me anything, not even a young goat to celebrate with my friends. But you have killed the fattened calf for this son of yours who has wasted your property with prostitutes and wild living.

The father pleads for his son to accept the return of the younger brother. The father pleads with the elder brother to come in from the porch and join the celebration, but he doesn’t. At least he doesn’t when Jesus ends the story. The story leaves us hanging and wondering if the eldest son ever chooses to show the same grace his father has shown. There he is at the end of the story on the porch alone. He had built a prison for himself right at home. Although only a few steps

away from his father, he has chosen to live in that moment in a land far, far away.

Which son are you today? Are you the younger son? You have become impatient with God. You have decided that life is best lived on your own terms and in your own way. You are tired of God’s ways and besides God’s ways seem to be filled with too many rules of do’s and don’ts. You want to live life on your terms, in your way and that is what you have done. For a while it worked just fine. In fact, for a while you got exactly what you were hoping to get. But lately it has not been working.

Something unforeseen has come to your life, because something always that we don’t expect comes. You just were not ready for that challenge. You were not ready not to be healthy as you have been. You were not ready for the economy to slump. You were not ready for that relationship to end. It is the unforeseen crisis that reveals where we truly are and yours has left you in a place far, far away from God.

There you are in the moment when all seems lost, and the distant country seems like it is going to have to be your new home you hear a word...it is not a final word, or a word with all of the answers, or an easy solution, it is simply that word “what if?” What if I turned to God? What if God would forgive me? What if God’s way is really the best way? What if?

Maybe as much as you want to see yourself in the younger son, you really resonate with the elder son, today. You have been the one who has been faithful. You have been the one who never ventured off on your own. While others stand and give testimonies of dramatic changes that God has brought, yours is a simple story of life long faith. You resent all the fuss made over the one who went astray and has returned. You wonder if anyone will ever notice all that you have done. The truth is you are a little jealous of those like the younger son. You would like if just for one day to be irresponsible and to get away to your own far away country. Every time those Las Vegas tourism commercials come on and say what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas you say to yourself, “now that sounds good.” Yet, you stay... you stay physically, however your spirit reveals something else. You might stay, but your heart is far away. Your heart has become calloused and cold because the same pride that led the younger son to a distant country has captured your heart and will not allow you the ability to rejoice, when you see grace and to celebrate when you see forgiveness. You too

are captive in a land far, far away.

What if? What if you chose to be like your father after all? What if you chose to exhibit to others what you have watched your father do all these years? What if you could find the same grace and compassion that God has for others, and let that be your way of living as well? What if there was a way off the porch and back into the father’s house?

No matter which son we see ourselves in today, the father’s reaction is the same. The father comes to us. The father invites us back into the house. The father offers forgiveness and restoration and celebration to both sons. But notice he will not force it on either of them. He lets the younger son go off to the distant country and he lets the elder son stay on the porch if that is their choice. But if they will come home there is a loving father waiting for them. Each one’s journey home to the father begins with one step.

The younger son must take just one step. He just has to get up and go and there he finds the father waiting. The elder son just needs to take one step. One step toward the door and in a moment’s time he is back in the house and in the middle of the party. It really is just one step back to the father and there the father meets the son.

It seems to me, that this story does in the end leave us all hanging. It leaves us in the tension of hearing and doing. It leaves everything up in air and waiting for us to respond.

How is this story going to end today for you? We can disregard it and say I have heard it all before, or we can take another look in the mirror and say wait a minute that is me. That’s me destitute from my own decisions. That is me in a distant place apart from God. I need to see things as they really are. I need to ask for God’s forgiveness and rediscover God’s presence in my life. What if today I would just take that first step back toward God? Or do you see yourself lost right here in the church. Your actions say a different thing than your heart. Although you remain faithful, your heart is far from home. What if today I asked God’s forgiveness and asked God to help me be like him? What if today I would say, God I want to be a person filled with love, compassion and forgiveness?

Come home wandering sons and daughters. God is waiting for your first step toward forgiveness and celebration. When we could dwell in the father’s household, why would we stay another moment in a land far, far away?

