

A sermon preached at Congregational Church of Almaden Valley, United Church of Christ
San Jose, CA
Date: March 14, 2010
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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (Psalm 32)

Did He or Didn't He?

This morning we read my favorite parable used by Jesus. It's the parable of the prodigal son. This poetic ballad is so rich in possibilities and meaning and it's just a really good epic story, too. It is a story filled with the stuff of relationships and family, foolishness and wisdom, sin and forgiveness, death and resurrection, jealousy and acceptance, anger and happiness. The prodigal son has become one of those stories of our faith that I would guess most people raised in the church would recognize. Probably if you were asked to name two parables, this would be one of them; it's so well known. The return of prodigal son is such a familiar theme, I'm sure that somebody has made a country western song out of it!

It's so filled with meaning that it's one of those parables of the Christian scriptures that we preachers would say "that will preach." And, if one is in the ministry long enough, you get plenty of chances to preach it. The good thing about the parable is that there are so many angles you can preach from—you can preach from the father's viewpoint, the prodigal son's viewpoint, the brother's viewpoint, the slave's or servant's viewpoint, hey, maybe even the pig's viewpoint when the prodigal son was eating pods with them! (I'll admit that I have not heard any preachers sermonize from the pig's viewpoint or the prostitute's viewpoint, but I'll have to try that sometime!)

Speaking of the prostitute... (Moms and Dads, don't worry, I'm not going to preach from that viewpoint today!) (Probably scared a few of you for a moment!) But, I do want to focus for a little while on just what made the older brother complain that his younger had, as our text said, "*devoured your property with prostitutes.*" (Luke 15:30b) The older brother was complaining bitterly to his father that his younger sibling had spent his inheritance in a very specific way. He didn't say he spent his money on murder or mayhem or drinking or drugs or fatty foods (although pork can be fatty!) did he? No, he was very specific about how his brother had thrown away the father's money. Why do you suppose he was so specific? Now, maybe he had heard rumors. But, we don't read that in this story. Maybe his brother had written him, but that's really doubtful with the bad

relationship they probably had and because few people back then actually were literate. So how did he know so much that he could make the very specific claim of how his brother spent the money?

I have my own personal prodigal son story. And it does involve my father. But, I assure you, it doesn't include anything about my inheritance or the same kind of sin the other prodigal son was accused of!

When I graduated from high school my Dad, as many of you know, had been one of my school principals. And my Dad was a very strong authority figure in my life and like most grown sons I look back in tremendous love for my father who did show me how to be responsible, honorable, and upright and he instilled in me a desire to be of service to my neighbor. That is what makes his reaction to something I did after I graduated from high school so strange. You see, I was scheduled to go on to college at my Dad's alma mater and become a teacher or school administrator just like him. I had scholarships to this school and my older sister was already there getting her degree in education and teaching. But, being the rebellious spirit that I was, I, one day in the summer of 1972, up and joined the Navy. After spending the morning with the recruiters and signing my induction papers I went back to my Dad's office at school walked in and announced with joy what I had done. Oh my, I had never ever seen my Dad so angry. Ever. He launched into a diatribe of how I had thrown away everything I had worked for and how I would come back drinking, smoking, swearing—you name it—everything our church considered death dealing sins. I was lucky to simply get metaphorically “kicked” out of his office. I'm sure he wanted to literally kick me out! And he didn't speak to me for several days after.

Just like the older brother in the story of the prodigal son who claimed his younger brother had squandered his inheritance on prostitutes my father was projecting on me the things that I would do and become if I joined the Navy. There could be some projection going on the part of our older brother here, too.

In our scripture the story Jesus is claimed to have said that the younger prodigal son “*squandered his property in dissolute living.*” (Luke 15:13b) In other English versions of the Bible the term used is “riotous” living. The Greek word is *asótós* meaning wasteful, reckless, riotous. (See Strong's <http://strongnumbers.com/greek/811.htm>.) The word used in our NRSV version and other versions of the Bible is the middle Latin word “dissolute.” Now, while the Greek word, from the several interpretations of the Greek I found, does not associate the word with frequenting prostitutes, the middle Latin word, dissolute, does in some usages have that usage. But “dissolute” or

dissolvere is a word used dating back only to the 14th century, not the as early as the Greek word *asótós*. (See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dissolute>.) Folks, not only do I think the older brother was projecting some his own fears or worries or judgments on his younger brother by claiming he hung around with prostitutes, but somewhere along the line of scribes rewriting the scriptures injected their own projections into the text. (Other commentators, too, say the claim of employing prostitutes was “unproven.” (See <http://net.bible.org/verse.php?book=Luk&chapter=15&verse=30#>.) This claim of the older brother or the later scribes may or may not be true but the original Greek does not necessarily mean what the older brother claimed for his younger sibling.

One definition of psychological projection is “the unconscious act of denial of a person's own attributes, thoughts, and emotions, which are then ascribed to the outside world, such as to the weather, the government, a tool, or to other people. Thus, it involves imagining or *projecting* that others have those feelings.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_projection and other dictionaries/encyclopedias)

When I left to join the Navy, my father projected onto me, his own anxieties and fears and they were irrational, God rest his soul. Why my father thought I would end up squandering my life in dissolute or riotous behavior when HE had raised me I just can't fathom. In addition, my father's own older brother was a life-long military service member who served with distinction and is today one of the most righteous and religiously pious people I know. The prodigal's son's brother was engaging in his own anxious projections and so was my father.

(By the way, I want to let you know that after a couple of days my Dad forgot all about his worries and helped smooth my way into the Navy with joy and grace. The prodigal Dad had returned to his loving self! And just for the record I did not live riotously or dissolutely when I was in the Navy!)

All of us, as moms and dads, as sons and daughter, as brothers and sisters, project our anxieties onto people we love and even strangers we do not even know. This facet of the human psyche is well documented and probably unavoidable. But we can try to check our selves because our projections can sometimes leave scars and wounds on people we love and can significantly color our views on things we really know nothing or little about that are going on in the larger society. And don't forget that when you read the Bible that there are centuries of scribes interpreting what other scribes have interpreted before with all their own anxieties and projections! Let's all be careful what we project on others. Amen.

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