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At Your Doorstep: More Prodigal Than You Know

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Luke 15:11 - 32

I love the new banner the missions & evangelism cell has put up over our exit door: “You are now entering the mission field.” It fits, you see, because we live in a whole new era, as it relates to us as Christ followers. Scholars identify 3 eras of Christianity:

The Apostolic Age, when Christianity was illegal, lasted from 33—312AD. When the church began, **the mission field at your doorstep.** Persecution was terrible. During the final decade of this era, Christians were killed, starved, and beaten. Christian writings, homes, and places of worship were burned, until the Edict of Milan in 312AD brought about tolerance.

The mission field moved to the edge of the empire after the Age of Christendom began in 313AD with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine. His mother had been working on him his whole life, but it wasn't until he was in his 40s that he became a believer. During those times, whatever the Emperor did, everybody did. Thus, everyone became “Christian,” the building of churches and cathedrals began. Many scholars believe this lasted until about the 1950s.

The Postmodern Age began sometime in the '50s, as the move toward secularization grew, and it continues to this day. **The mission field is once again at your doorstep.** Sandy Varney, along with her husband Steve own the Lighthouse in Dexter. They have started a Bible study for their employees after work on Sundays, and have young adults there who have never heard of Moses.

If the mission field is at our doorstep, what does that mean for you and me personally? And what do we do about it? In order to explore this, I want to look at Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. I would love for this to be our theme verse. Scholars have called it “The Gospel within the Gospel.” Chances are you've heard it before. We're going to begin our month of Missions & Evangelism with the first part of the story, and end it with the second part. Luke 15:11...

In the mind of a first century Israelite, it begins dangerously: “*There was a man had two sons...*” This sets up conflict immediately. Why only two? It's a we/they scenario, a “haves versus the have-nots.” It conjures up infamous history for the people there: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau.

12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country" Jesus doesn't tell us why he wanted to leave, but we always give the younger son a bum rap. The fact is, sometimes leaving home is the best thing we can do. Home may be a stifling place: a place of conflict, contempt, or abuse; or it may be what holds a person back from being whole, or from achieving responsible adulthood. And millions of people are forced to leave their homes because of civil war, government, famine. At the end of 2006 estimates of the world Internal Displaced Persons population rose to 24.5 million in some 52 countries. We know he was leaving for good. He took everything with him. Think of what *that* did to his family back at home. There are a number of folks here who find themselves right in the middle of this parable.

“and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.” Prodigal living – the recklessness of sin. He tried to satiate himself. He tried it all. He had his cake and ate it too, but it bit back. National Geographic aired a special one night about how eagles catch fish in lakes. They fly high above the water but their eyesight is so good they can spot fish in the water below. When they see one they fold their wings back and aim directly for the water, going as fast as 130mph. When they reach the water they spread their wings, reach out their talons, grab the fish, and begin flying back to shore.

On this TV special, they showed film of a very unusual occurrence. An eagle made a dive for a fish and grabbed it in its talons. But the fish was much larger than the eagle realized. As it began to fly to the shore you could see the strain in the eagle’s flight. It was not going to make it to shore with this huge fish. It then tried to drop the fish, to let go of it. But the talons of the eagle had dug into the flesh of the fish so deeply that it could not pull them out. It struggled but to no avail.

Slowly the eagle descended into the lake and drowned, unable to let loose its catch. Many times, like the Prodigal and like the eagle, we grab on to something that can be dangerous. We feel we have control and can stop holding on any time we like. It becomes a habit or a lifestyle. One day we try to get out or let go and discover that we no longer have a hold of it but it has a hold of us. Materialism. Addiction. Work. Selfishness. Attitudes. Sin. It only drags us down, like the prodigal.

The prodigal hit bottom – this good little Jewish boy fed pigs while starving himself. Jesus had such a good sense of humor! But he also took sin very seriously. This was the lowest of all positions for an Israelite. And the young man took it! His reckless wastefulness had led him to a terrible end.

But something happened in that pigsty. *17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'* Prevenient grace, we Methodists call it. God was able to work through the memory of his father, even there, and the son “*came to his senses.*” For years I tried to figure out what that meant, because I wanted to change the world. It could be the key to unlocking the secret of helping people experience God! In the Greek it means *to see clearly, to repent, to realize* what he had done. But that’s *not* what brought him home. The prodigal son didn’t come home because of anything *he* did.

What brought him home was *the witness* of what his father did for the lowest of the hired servants.

They were well cared for. (They have more than enough to eat). Remember his words? *“At home even the hired men have food enough to spare.”* That’s what got him. He came back because of what his father had been doing all along. He came back because of what he had witnessed, at his own doorstep. His father took good care, even the lowest servants had food to spare! Church, we’ve got to do the same! KIDS: We were talking around the dinner table about friends and school and popularity, and it occurred to me: if you want to find out who your friends really are, watch to see how they treat the biggest losers and least popular kid in school. If they treat them well, they’re good people. If they don’t, they’re not. It’s as simple as that. But it goes way deeper than that: In Matthew 25, Jesus explains the power in operation here: *25:34 "Then the King will say... 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' 37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' 40 "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”* That’s the spiritual power when you love the unlovable, the least, and the lost like real people, the way this guy’s dad did.

And the son's daydreaming turned into action. "20 *So he got up and went to his father.*" Good intentions, **A 100 resolutions, mission statements, vision statements, and purpose statements, are nothing compared to a single grain of putting it into practice.** Just do it. The determination to return home is good; but it's when the wandering young man *actually begins moving* that he draws near the blessing. If you have been saying "I'll get my act together, I'll turn to God, I'll help the poor, I'll make a difference," quit making resolutions and come to practicing. You must start where you are, on your doorstep. You must start right now. You must start small. You probably won't go to Africa if you haven't been to Alpha House or Cass Ave. Today may be your day! Let Christ change your thinking and believe in him. Join the adventure!

Here is Jesus' shocker: "*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.* The father saw his son while he was still far away. The eyes of mercy see farther than the eyes of repentance.

[Archie sings the song: "WHEN GOD RAN" by Benny Hester]

And look: 21 "*The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* Your stance matters. **Because the Prodigal stood ready to confess, God was able to love him all the more.** (Now you may know we cannot be loved more by God than we are in this moment, but our posture and how we come to God can enable us to experience God's love more or less. It depends on our stance).

The KJV says "*He fell on his son's neck,*" hugging him and kissing him over and over. Because the prodigal stood ready to confess, he was able to experience God's love all the more. Our experience with God depends a lot on our stance. "*God on the neck of a sinner*" – what a great image of the Omnipotent God's love for us! Do people know it exists? And where did it begin? With the hug? In the pigsty? Or at the doorstep of his father's house? Jesus gives us just enough to see that it began as the father cared for even the lowest of his hired hands.

I believe that's what's going to reach the next generation of unconnected people. Our witness, right here. **Because most of the prodigals decide in the pigsty.** And you can't get to every pigsty, but you can operate as soon as you head out your door, day in, day out. So many people think they're not good enough to be loved. This week, *DO* something that people just might remember when they are far from home. Support missions. *Show* them Jesus' love. Bake for a college student away from home or have dinner with a neighbor who eats alone. Call your mother-in-law. Someone who's sick. Someone who's a single parent. Write a soldier. Visit a resident at the Alpha House homeless shelter. If we were even more intentionally doing this on our doorsteps, imagine the impact we could have for those far from home who God wants to reach?

I want to conclude with one more interesting fact you may have overlooked in the story. The son begins his "return home speech," 22 "*But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'* So they began to celebrate." **The prodigal son couldn't even finish his rehearsed speech before the father speaks.** God doesn't need time to think about "how" he will love you. He already settled that, eons ago, by his eternal covenant. **God doesn't have to take any time to prepare for our return.** That was taken care of by the life and sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ. Titus 3:5 "*He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*" They had a banquet feast for him, fatted calf and all. And each month we remember the eternal covenant in a special way: the Sacrament of Communion. Won't you claim the covenant that was begun for just such a moment as this?