

THE WINTER OF THE SOUL

The Season of Realization (Part 3)

Text: Luke 15:13-17

We're exploring this month what we're calling some "Seasons of the Soul." We're trying to name and describe four personal movements that God invites us to make in order to help ourselves and others find the flourishing life he wants for us all. These four movements are major themes of the Bible and our lives and, as we are coming to see, they get vividly portrayed in the most famous story Jesus ever told. Let's hear the Word of God: **There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had [and] set off for a distant country. (Luke 15:11-13)**

Now, as we explored in great depth last week (and you can find on our website) the father in this story makes one of the most difficult and important movements any of us could ever make – and some of us may still need to make. At great personal cost, he decides to RELEASE his grip and let this beloved someone (his son) and a beloved something (a big share of his estate) go off down the driveway.

What unfolds from that point on is a stunning narrative in Jesus gives us a glimpse of three states of consciousness or stages of awareness on the part of this traveling son that may just reveal more about our own condition than is totally comfortable (but the person sitting next to us probably needs to hear about!) The first stage of awareness is "BLINDNESS" for reasons that will become clear. Jesus says, **the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.**

Now, let's just pause here for a moment. The son in the story is a wealthy person – more than he actually knows -- but he is blind to what that wealth is. At this point, he thinks his wealth is the cash he is carrying with him and what that cash can do for him. And so, we're told, he **squandered his wealth**. The dictionary defines "squandering" as the act of wasting something (especially time or money) in a foolish or reckless manner. Is the kid aware that he's being foolish or reckless with his money? Nope. Why not? He's blind to it. How do we know that? Because he's not just wasting his wealth; he's squandering it **in wild living**. The Greek words translated in English as "wild living" more literally mean, "incurable illness." They suggest far more than mere pleasure-seeking, but actual self-destructive behavior.

It's important to get that distinction, because we're often sold a picture of God as somebody who's big concern is to overcome our pleasure-seeking. God is often painted like some Cosmic Grinch who is sorely irritated by the human propensity for fun and pleasure and adventuring. But that's not true. Jesus himself said: **I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly. (John 10:10)** Jesus would not have been as phenomenally popular as he was with fishermen and bar-owners and

other ordinary people were he a prude.

What God doesn't want is to see us devolve into self-destructive behavior. When I was a young man, out sowing my wild oats and carrying on, it hardly ever occurred to me that I was hurting my parents or other people by my behavior. It never occurred to me that I was hurting myself -- except maybe after a particularly bad hangover. But I was. I was doing a lot of damage to other people and to myself. My behavior was like a deli-slicer on my soul and the souls of some of the people I touched.

The Bible teaches that the basic human condition is spiritual blindness and helping us see this is one of the major purposes of Christ's parable. Jesus wants us to see that we are stunningly selfish like the younger brother in Jesus' story, or we are appallingly self-righteous like the elder brother we'll learn about later in the story, or if you're like me you are both. But we start out in life largely blind to it. We have barely a clue about what is really driving us and what this drive is doing to us and the people we influence.

We just set off boldly for the **distant country** -- to the land where our dreams and desires will all come true. We press on convinced that there we will be seen as perfect or lovable or successful or special. We may march along trying to master knowledge or find security or just have a great time. Wherever we go, we may try to be in control or to make everything peaceful. The core drive is different for different ones of us and none of these impulses is bad in themselves. The problem is that these drives balloon up till they dominate our way of being and seeing more than we know. They become what the Christian spiritual tradition calls a "FALSE SELF" -- a self that is defined by our varying appetites and anxieties rather than by our true identity as a beloved child of the Father. And we are blind to this.

When we meet him in the **distant country** the younger son in Christ's parable is deep into his false self -- in full-on, party-on mode. But **after he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country... (Luke 15:13-14a)**. He didn't see that coming. He was blind to the fact that money runs out. He was blind to the reality that times of famine are as common as times of feasting. I'm allegorizing here, but I'm convinced that a core biblical truth is that if your "wealth" lies in what the False Self craves, you are going to be in trouble when famine strikes [see page 5].

If, like the son in the story, your false "wealth" lies in your ability to be extravagant and popular, who are you when you lose your job and can't afford the car or house or country club anymore? If, like the elder brother we meet later in the tale, your "wealth" lies in being such a perfectly responsible rule-follower, who are you when all the attention is being lavished on the rule-breakers in your workplace or households? It's hard but not bad when what feeds the False Self runs out.

Famines are a serious test of who we are and what our wealth truly is. They can be phenomenal opportunities to move to a higher, better state of consciousness and character. Usually, however, when Famine comes -- especially early in our spiritual journey -- we move not to humble enlightenment but to DENIAL. Jesus says that there was a famine in the whole country and **he began to be in need. (Luke 15:14)**

Seriously? I think this is a bit of Jesus' humor here. I suspect that what Christ was voicing in this verse was the younger son's perspective. Truthfully, this kid has been in need for a very long time. So far, he has ravaged his father's heart and estate, divorced himself from his family, spent his entire inheritance in self-destructive ways, run around with prostitutes (as we learn later) and still appears to be in denial about both his condition and its solution. But be patient; it gets worse!

So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. (Luke 15:14b-16) This detail confirms just how far the younger son has wandered from home. Apparently, he's gone to place where pig-keeping is common. If this were a literal story, that would mean "Nowhere in Israel." The Jews regarded pigs as completely non-kosher – meaning impure. The Talmud, the central theological reference book of Jewish rabbis said: "Cursed be the man who would breed swine." As a Jew you didn't raise pigs, feed pigs, eat pigs, eat what pigs ate, or date people that do! Jesus is giving us an incredibly vivid picture of someone who has wandered as far from their True Self and their actual wealth as it is possible for someone to go. By saying that he was looking to feed himself with the pods that the pigs were eating, he is saying that he had given up his humanity. By saying that no one gave him anything, the text is saying that the locals regarded him as less than a pig.

Do you know what, besides pork, isn't kosher? A lot of food. But when I read this story I think of shrimp and a fight I had some time ago with my wife, Amy. Some of you may recall this story. I was heading outside to barbecue some shrimp and Amy warned me to be careful to keep an eye on it because I often burned it. I was really miffed at that assertion. It struck right at the heart of my need to be competent at crucial manly tasks like barbecuing. "I'm NOT going to burn it," I snapped back. A few minutes later I went back out to check on the shrimp. Some evil spirit had set a grease fire in the pan below the grill and the barbecue was an inferno!

Moments later, I slunk inside with the charcoaled crustaceans in hand and Amy sighed. "You burned the shrimp." She said it very calmly, but I flooded with defensive anger. She clearly couldn't see that this was NOT my fault. I came back at her and she came back at me. It got ugly. I stormed out, and then went back at it again, refining my justifications each time and pointing out how obviously wrong she was to criticize me.

And then Amy said, quietly: "Dan, what is it about you that finds it so hard to simply admit that you made a mistake?" And in a nanosecond I went from being 100% certain that she was in the wrong, to being 100% sure that I was. In a flash of uncommon insight, I realized that what Amy was naming about me was true, not just in this instance, but in so many other areas of my life. I grew up believing that I just HAD to be seen as competent and unflinching, worthy of the praises of others. It wasn't right or even what God and others required. It was simply my False Self blazing hotter than that barbecue. The amazing thing is that I lived so much of my life blind to my condition and in active denial about my condition. When the moment of REALIZATION came, it was

painful but profoundly freeing.

Jesus goes on to say that while the younger son was still stinking of unkosher food, **he came to his senses...** Some translations say "**he came to himself,**" as if acknowledging that he'd been living a False Self life and now begins to find his True Identity. I like the first translation every bit as much. A Wisconsin pastor by the name of Brent Juliot agrees. He says that it's as if, prior to this revelation, "our sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell have ceased to function... We have no awareness of how foolish we've been, how lost, how alone, how hopeless we are..." or the injury we do to ourselves and others by our senseless way of living. And that gets us into so much trouble... And then finally, but suddenly, in a moment, our eyes are opened so we see where we are living... we hear the grunting pigs... touch their skin... taste the dirt in our mouths... and smell the stench" of our condition. It's like burning shrimp. We realize that not only have we been doing wrong, something about us at the core IS wrong.

[The younger son] said, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! (Luke 15:17). In other words, "How did I get here? Even my Dad's paid employees are better off than this." In some small way, the boy was starting to recognize that he had been living in a state of grace in the Father's household and had failed to appreciate it. I wish I could say that experiencing the full force and consequences of one's False Self will always bring someone to their senses, but the human tendency to excuse, rationalize, or harden further is remarkable. We get a picture of that in the words and actions of the elder brother later in the story. He too is invited to perceive the state of grace that had always undergirded his life. But he does not wake up to it. It is only the younger child who makes the REALIZATION that will lead to a season of REPAIR and then RESTORATION that changes his life for good. **I will set out and go back to my father." (Luke 15:17-18a)**

You and I can do likewise. But to make that journey authentically, we must start to come to our senses. As you come to this Table today, what's the REALIZATION Christ may be calling you to? What about your character are your current circumstances revealing? What is the particular driver of the False Self in you? What would Jesus want you to pray for the power to release and leave behind as you come to this place where his sacrifice on your behalf shows you and me the depths of the Father's love and the truth that he will always welcome us home.

FALSE SELF/WEALTH FORMS OF FAMINE

- To be perfect I didn't get it right
- To be lovable I'm not liked
- To be successful I failed
- To be special I'm not recognized
- To be knowledgeable I can't figure this out
- To be secure I'm in danger
- To be fully content I'm not satisfied

- To be in control I'm being overcome
- To be at peace I'm caught in conflict