

THE SPRINGTIME OF THE SOUL

The Season of Repair (Part 3)

Text: Luke 15:11-20

We're halfway through a four part series on what we've been calling "Seasons of the Soul." Our purpose in this series has been to unpack four crucial movements that God invites us to make to change our lives for the better or to improve the life of someone around us. Like the seasons of the year, we don't meet these themes just once in our life, but over and over again. A healthy life involves many experiences of releasing and recognizing, repairing and restoring. Which of those movements might be especially relevant to you right now?

All four of these significant themes are present in a famous story Jesus told about a family with a father and two sons that got recorded in Luke chapter 15. We're going to return to that amazing story in just a moment, but to introduce the big idea we'll explore there, permit me to tell you another tale. Craig Barnes is a pastor and the current president of Princeton Seminary. But in one of his messages, Craig confessed the pain of having a father who was much more like a prodigal son.

"[My father] left us when I was sixteen, and... never stopped running. Every time we tried to find him, he would only leave and disappear again. He died alone in a raggedy trailer park somewhere in the middle of Florida... My Dad missed all of the important events in his [kids'] lives: graduations, weddings, birth of children, our two ordinations, and both of our Ph.D. ceremonies... I prayed and prayed that he would return to us. I used to yearn for the day that he would show up in a congregation where I was preaching. My longing was for him to come through the line at the end of worship, take my hand and say, 'Good job, son.' But he never came."

Following the funeral, Craig and his brother went to the little mobile home where their dad had apparently lived, hoping to piece together something about his life. To their surprise, they found on the kitchen table a devotional journal filled with their father's handwriting. Recorded there were pages of his personal prayers and reflections on various Bible passages he'd read. It stunned them that something of his childhood faith had still remained with him. One particular page, however, caught their attention. The page was tattered and dog-eared from frequent reference, and across the top was scrawled the words: **"Daily Prayer List."** "The first two items on that list," says Barnes, "were my brother's name and my name."

"I will never understand the lonely madness that drove my father away from everyone who loved him"¹ – and, apparently, who he still loved. Why didn't he come back? What kept him from returning home? Have YOU got a guess?

I do. I suspect that father figured that his relationship with his family was **"Beyond Repair?"** Is there any phrase in the English language more disheartening than that one? Have you used it or felt it, yourself? Maybe so much pain or distance grew up between you and somebody you were once close to that you figure: *"Well, that relationship is gone forever."* Perhaps like the Father in Jesus' parable, you let go of someone you cared about, praying that they'd eventually come back to you or to God, but they haven't. You've watched them spiraling down or spinning away, longing to see them come to their senses, but now they seem beyond repair. It could be your relationship with your child or your spouse, an extended family member or former friend that seems irreparable. It might be YOU who is caught up in some cycle of sin that you don't know how to fix. In the language of the Parable we've been studying, maybe you're off in the **"distant country"** right now. You feel you've **"squandered"** too much. *"I'm so far from home, I could never get back. It's beyond repair."*

If I could implant one major thought into all of us today, it would be this – and Jesus says it himself. Never forget that **With God, all things are possible (Matt 19:26)**. Things that don't look like they can be healed can. Relationships that don't seem like they can be reconciled can be. Problems that don't appear to have a fix can be solved. With God's help, there is more often than not a way back home. But you don't just get beamed or teleported there. Whether we're talking about doing home repairs or fixing our finances or getting our body in shape or restoring our connection with another person or – most importantly -- with God, **Repair is a journey that requires we take some steps**. Think about that for a moment.

You may recall that when we left the prodigal son last week, he was going nowhere fast. He was sitting on the ground in a pig pen starving. Jesus says that **He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything (Luke 15:16)**. This guy is utterly out of resources. It could have been the end for him. But, instead, that bottom became a beginning. Somehow, an impulse arises within him that says, in effect: *"This is not where or how my story is going to end. I want something better. I want it enough to get up and do something about it. I will set out and go back to my father (Luke 15:18)*.

There is a lesson in this for us, I think. In the journey toward a better future, you and I must, first, **truly care for repair**. By that I mean, we can't just ignore our problems or shrug our shoulders in helplessness about them or wait for somebody else to fix things for us. We have to find within ourselves a passion for things to be different. Whether it's something as small as repairing our car or as large as finding the life our Father in heaven wants for us, we've got to nurture in ourselves a holy discontent about the way things are. *"I don't want my marriage to stay this way. I don't want my relationship with that child or parent or friend to end this way. I'm not letting this sin in my life block me any longer. I will set out and go in the direction of a better future."*

I don't mean to suggest that it is easy to do this. I can think of a lot of reasons why the son in Jesus' parable might have just quit. I mean, please remember how badly he'd messed up, thus far. He'd effectively told his dad he wished he were dead. He'd humiliated his family before their peers. He'd absconded with at least a third of the family's estate and lost ALL of it. By Jewish standards of that time, if this kid ever returned to the neighborhood, he faced excellent prospects of getting stoned – and not at the legalized marijuana shop. So, why'd he dare to believe that repair was possible?

Here's the answer: He had some confidence in his father's heart. Jesus says that **When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare (Luke 15:17).** In other words, look how generously Dad treats his employees. If he is that kind to his servants, maybe he has a TINY bit of kindness left in his heart to extend to a very messed up son.

I want to suggest to you that when it comes to fixing broken relationships, you must dare to trust that the other is open to repair. I know that is a leap of faith because, truthfully, not everyone is. There are some very hard, very self-righteous, very unforgiving people in this world. There were in Jesus' time too. They were called Pharisees. The Pharisees thought that people who messed up should be condemned and kept at a permanent distance. In fact, Luke chapter 15 opens up with these words: **Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."** (Luke 15:1-2) It miffed and mystified them that Jesus was so openly welcoming and extending kindness to messed up people who were so obviously "beyond repair."

On this topic, I read a fascinating article this week by an NYU professor named, James Carse. Carse argues that most of us regularly play what he calls, **finite or infinite games**. FINITE games are ones where the boundaries are highly defined. There are strict rules and when a player violates one of them he or she is heavily penalized. Think of football, hockey or American Ninja Warrior. In finite games like those, the game has a specific time limit and the object of the activity is to win. INFINITE games work differently. There is no time limit and the boundaries are more fluid. The rules are made up by the players and can be changed for the sake of the game's real purpose. The goal you see is not for one person to win over another or beat the clock. The goal is to prolong the game. It's to keep the learning, the growing, the togetherness going. It's the game of life, the game of relationships.

The Pharisees of this world play FINITE games. What Jesus was trying to teach them with his parables, however, is that the heavenly Father is more interested in the INFINITE game. He's less concerned about people making mistakes and more concerned about what people do about those mistakes. The Kingdom of God is about learning and growing and getting better together. For that reason, you and I can trust that, for as long as we live, God is always open to repairing the relationship between us

and him. And he wants us to be open to repairing our relationships with one another wherever possible.

So, how do we do it? When we've messed up terribly in our relationships – like the prodigal son in Christ's parable or like Craig Barnes' prodigal dad or like the fight I described last week over the burned shrimp – what are we supposed to do? Well, if this parable is any clue, one constructive step is to speak words of repair. Listen to how the younger son in Christ's story does that. After deciding that he cares enough to try to repair the relationship with his father, and daring to trust that his father might be open to a repair attempt, the son makes a commitment to go to his dad and say:

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.” (Luke 15:18-19).

In other words, I wronged God and you by my actions. I have no argument to justify myself. Let me just serve you. Are you accustomed to bringing that kind of humility, vulnerability, and servanthood to people when your relationship has broken down? Obviously, that's difficult when they are clearly in the wrong and deserve to be put in the penalty box. But how committed are you to the Finite Game? How ready are you to be penalized for all your errors? How by our words can we show that – like our Heavenly Father – we're more interested in playing the Infinite Game?

Renowned marital therapist, John Gottman says that the healthiest marriages are always marked by an unusually high willingness to speak and receive **WORDS OF REPAIR**: They regularly say things like: *I am so sorry. My actions or reactions were too extreme. I really blew that one. Can I try again? I want to fix this but I don't know how. I can see my part in all of this. I know that I hurt you and I feel terrible about that. I think I see why I got so lost and did you wrong the way I did. I realize now that not only did I fail you, I failed God. I can see that this is a bigger pattern in my life. Please forgive me.* What could you say to someone in your life today or in days ahead?

As we move to a close, I hope you've seen over the past three weeks how many practical principles from this Parable land helpfully in our daily lives. I would not want you, however, to miss the main and biggest point of this story. Jesus is trying to say: God wants a repaired relationship with you and me. No matter how we've hurt his heart or dishonored his name by our selfish or self-righteous actions, no matter how far we may have run from him, no matter how badly we've squandered what he's given us, no matter how deeply we've forsaken our true identity, we can still come home. We just need to sincerely care about the repair of our relationship with him. We simply need to speak genuine words of sorrow over how it's gone wrong. We merely need to trust that he is open to receiving us back. It was in this spirit that we're told: **So he got up and went to his father (Luke 15:20).**

Imagine with me that young man cresting the final hill on that long walk home. There, spread out at his feet, was the vast expanse of his family's estate. Everything looked much like it had when he had left, save for the south forty acres now ringed with someone else's fence. There were the workers laboring under the glow of the late afternoon sun. There was the gracious farmhouse, nestled comfortably among the golden fields. And yet there, down at the end of the dirt lane that ran up to the house, was an unfamiliar sight. There where the road met the driveway of the family home, was the figure of a lone man, silhouetted in the light of the setting sun -- a solitary watchman who stood waiting at the gate.

What the boy could not know -- for who on earth could believe it was so -- was that that lone figure had gazed toward the crest of that hill many times through all the long days since his child had left home. And then, all of a sudden the figure broke his stolid stance. He took a step down the lane that wound its way from the old estate to the top of the hill where the boy stood. The silhouette took another step, and then another, each coming faster. And, then, the old man hiked up his robes, and broke into a run.

Hold that picture in your mind's eye till we meet again next week, because that my brothers and sisters, is your Father running to meet you.

¹ Craig Barnes, *"The Hopes and Fears of All the Years,"* (12-5-10)