

# Comfortably Numb.....?

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## BECOMING FATHER

Do you remember being asked the question when you were younger, “What do you want to be?” I wonder what answer you gave? It probably changed a few times and changed as you got older didn’t it? Perhaps you’re at the stage in life where you are now the one asking the question of your children or grandchildren. I can remember wanting to be a carpenter when I was younger. I think it was primarily because my dad was, by training, a carpenter – before he became a vicar. Slowly though it became clear to me that I wasn’t naturally gifted at woodwork. Perhaps if I had grown up with my dad and watched him work I’d have learnt from him – but it didn’t come easily!

Did anyone actually grow up to be what they said they wanted to be as a kid? Point is – we all grow up – whether we want to or not! There is a process of change part of which at least is outside our control – our body grows! But we grow up too in the sense of maturing – maturing from childish ways to adult ways. We consider it wrong when people don’t grow up. A question we sometimes ask one another is: “How are you growing?”

We’ve spent some time in this story we call the parable of the prodigal son. Actually we’ve seen that it is the story of two prodigal sons: the one who left home and the one who didn’t. We may be able to identify with the younger son in the story. Maybe as we look back we look at him and say – yes that was me. Maybe some of us look back at him and say – yes I know what it is to have left home and come back. Maybe as we look back we look at him and realise – yes I left, but I’m not sure I’ve truly come back yet. Maybe some of us, in truth, are on the verge of leaving. We haven’t made our choice yet but we’re walking slowly and deliberately down a path that will lead us away.

Maybe some of us identify with the older son: we've been a good example; we've lived as faithfully as we can; we've stayed at home and done what has been expected of us. Yet in our hearts, we know that in truth, we've left home. We've allowed bitterness, jealousy, disappointment and un-forgiveness to take root, and we've not been able to live well in our Father's house. Maybe though, even as the elder son, we've known again the welcoming embrace of a return home. We had the courage to forgive, to let go of anger and bitterness and we were able to enjoy being home. Perhaps though, we know we are still standing outside: whatever is going on deep in our hearts and minds right now is preventing us from taking the bold step to come home. Probably in truth, we are a mixture of all these things and we have to keep looking in the mirror with an honest heart.

When we think of the father in this story we see his unconditional, all embracing love: we see the father who loved his younger son enough to let him walk away in the first place – risky love; we see the father who watched for his lost son everyday so that the moment he saw him on the horizon, he forgot his dignity, picked up his robe, bared his legs and ran to embrace him; we see the father who clothed his son to cover his dirtiness, the father who without hesitation showed immense trust in this wayward son by giving him the ring, the father who immediately welcomed his son as one of the family by giving him shoes for his feet. We see the same love and compassion for his older son, as he goes searching for a second time that day, the father who so longs to share all he has with his son.

All this is profoundly and wonderfully true. The love God has for us is seen in this picture of the father. The deep, deep love of Jesus, vast unmeasured, boundless free! Paul prays that we might know how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.... and yet tragically, some of us still remain outside! He loves you because he loves you because he loves you.....

You know when we read this story we maybe think that we are only either the younger son or the older son and spend a lot of time trying to figure out which one we are right now! But I'm not so sure it's true, perhaps there's a third person

in the parable with whom we are meant to identify. But for this to be true we need to do some growing up.

Henri Nouwen writes this: “Though I am both the younger son and the elder son, I am not to remain them, but to become the Father.”<sup>1</sup> For many of us as we read this story the Father is the one who remains outside – outside in the sense that we don’t identify with him. We know immediately we are one of the sons and the Father is God. We know immediately the point of the story: which son is you?... but God welcomes you and loves you anyway! The father is the character who remains outside. We look at the Father and we see the one who loves us yes, but he is the one who is there to gently, or not so gently rebuke us. We know we are the ones who went away. He is the one who is waiting for us to return. And maybe we never get beyond this in the story or in our own lives. Perhaps some of us, many of us, maybe all of us keep our distance from God fearful of his power, his rebuke, his dissatisfaction of us, you, me. But if we get stuck at this point in the story, we miss one of its greatest challenges.

The story shows the utmost vulnerability of the father – his heart of love and compassion. And when we open ourselves to his vulnerability, his love and his compassion, he is no longer outside, but dwells within us. And then we are faced with the challenge to see ourselves as the third person in this story – the Father.

The challenge of this story is for us to become like the Father – that is what we are to grow to become. When I was a child I wanted to become like my dad and you know, in my childish - desperately searching for a father who wasn’t there - kind of a way, I hit upon a deep and profound spiritual and eternal truth: I am called to become like my Father.

Henri Nouwen continues: “No father or mother ever became father or mother without having been son or daughter, but every son and daughter has to consciously choose to step beyond their childhood and become father and mother to others.”<sup>2</sup>

In his book on this parable, Jeff Lucas suggests that the father figure in the story most likely represents Jesus<sup>3</sup>. That is because he does the things Jesus does and

he treats people the way Jesus does. The reason Jesus came was to show us what God was like and he told the disciples in answer to their demand for him to show them the Father: "He who has seen me, has seen the Father." If we are to become like the Father in the story – then we are to become like Jesus; doing the things he did; saying the things he said; going to the places he went; meeting the kinds of people he met; treating people the way he treated them.

In order to help us walk towards our vision we have what we call Thrusts: What will we do! One of our Thrusts is: "Lights on a hill." It says this: "We will be kingdom people whose lives shine in the darkness and are attractive to others because God's light and love can be seen in all we do, helping them to find faith." To do that we need to become like Jesus, live like Jesus and become radical followers of his. We want to encourage one another to be bright lights in all the places that we go: home, school, work, family, church, social clubs, hobbies, sports clubs etc.....

It seems from the evidence of the story that the older brother refused to be where the younger brother was: if he's inside the house, then I'm outside the house! He wasn't, at least as far as we can tell, going to mix with the wrong kind of people. It's interesting to note, of course, that that is precisely the reason Jesus tells this story in the first place, in response to the Pharisees accusing Jesus of mixing with the wrong kinds of people! The point is powerful: "the challenge is to become like me – Jesus – and you need to understand there are no wrong kinds of people, only people I would die for... because I love them."

Jesus went to all the wrong kinds of people: he touched the leper; he let women speak to him and wash his feet; he healed the blind; he told the lame to get up and walk; he ate with tax collectors; he let the children come to him; he fed the hungry; he showed compassion to someone who had committed adultery. In his masterpiece of a sermon – the Sermon on the Mount as we call it, he said we have to be salt and light. Salt is useless as a preservative unless you rub it into the meat. Light cannot guide you or show you the way if you cover it up. The point is we must do what Jesus did if we are to become like him.

We have to find ways to get stuck into the world so that we can show them the father because we are living like Jesus. If we really, truly want people to come in from the outside and find a home with the father who loves them.... then we've got to go and find them, and befriend them, and live among them! It is not, as the elder son wanted to do, about separating ourselves from others. We need to find ways to engage. The only reason Street Pastors is so effective and such a powerful ministry is because they get out on the streets and meet the people!

Friends, I think the challenge from this part of the story today is twofold: first, we have to allow ourselves to be fully embraced by the father's love. Maybe that's you because you keep God outside never letting him get too close. How long will this go on? Secondly, we must face the challenge that we are to grow up and become the Father to others.

Friends this road is not an easy one. Jesus had much opposition; people ignored him; friends turned away; many rejected him – but he had the love and the compassion and the heart of his father. And he went on loving and forgiving ... all the way to the cross as we remember particularly in this coming week. We don't do this alone, because the mighty divine presence of the living God goes before us and behind us, to our right and to our left, above and below us, within us and outside us. So let us become radical followers of Christ, bright lights on a hill, living out the values of the kingdom of heaven, because we have known his great love for us.

Amen

Preached in Crawley Baptist church on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2010 by Rev. Ian Phillips.

1. Nouwen, Henri, *"The return of the prodigal son,"* DLT 1994 page 121
2. *Ibid*, page 121
3. Lucas, Geoff, *"Creating a prodigal friendly church,"* Zondervan 2008 page 40