

*Freedom: 12-Step Spirituality for Everyone Who Struggles
Locked Up in Our Own Devices*
Luke 15:11-32

That story of the Prodigal Son is familiar to most of us, even if you've never been a church person. It's become part of our literary culture. The story has a good ending for the son who insulted his father, ran away and ruined his life before he found himself and returned to the home where he finds he's been loved all along. But if you read or tell this story all the way to the end, as we just did—all the way to the part where the older brother refuses to come into the party, no matter how hard his father tries to convince him—you know that this was not meant to be a feel-good, heart-warming story about families who forgive each other.

Jesus told this story for a much more startling point: he was re-defining what it means to be lost. This story was intended to shatter our categories of who is lost and who is found, who is needy and who is just fine, thank you; what being “good” says about what's in your heart.

The context of this passage in Luke's Gospel makes it clear that when Jesus told this story, there were two groups of people listening: the recognizable sinners on one hand, and the Pharisees and religion teachers on the other. One of those groups looks a lot like the damnable younger son; the other looks more like the respectable older brother. This time, just like in most of Jesus' stories, it's the outcast in the picture who connects with God, and the respectable person who walks away without getting the point.

The two brothers remind us that *everyone* is searching for happiness and fulfillment. Some people search for it by following their own hell-bent path to whatever it is they're looking for. Like the younger son, they are going to live hard until they figure out right and wrong for themselves. They don't care much about convention, the rules you're supposed to live by. They step all over other people's standards and expectations as they head for the door leading out. Other people seek the same happiness, but by a completely different route. They don't set off any alarm bells for the people around them. They work hard to do the right thing; they stay close to home and they follow the rules. Often, they put aside their own dreams in order to do what is expected of them. Neither one of those two routes automatically leads you to fulfillment and celebration—symbolized by the big party the father throws at the end of the story. Either way, you can be lost; from either place, you can be found.

The younger sons among us—those of us whose wrongdoing and rebellion is clear-cut and visible—can get to a point where it's obvious that life is not working. Things get broken: jobs, marriages, finances. For older brothers, it's sometimes harder to see. We older brothers—who often show up as “church people”—can get just as far away from the source of life-giving joy. Ironically, it's our own determination to be good, to avoid wrongdoing, to do what's right, that keeps us locked in a space full of ‘should’ and ‘can't’, disappointment about how the rest of the world is conducting itself.

For both these kinds of people—the ones whose shame makes it hard to come home and the ones who have stayed close by in a cell of their own making—as long as we believe that we have to make it on our own, we are missing out on a whole banquet of love and forgiveness and grace.

In this story, dancing and delight happen in the father's house. Both sons are invited, but both sons have to get over themselves first, give in to the truth that the path they chose isn't working very well. The only requirement for receiving the forgiving, healing, life-giving grace of God—for entering the joyful feast in this story—is to know you need it.

And that, it seems to me, is the powerful insight of 12-step programs. The entry into Alcoholics Anonymous, and other programs like it, programs that deal with many forms of addiction, begins with an acknowledgment, by every participant, that life is out of control. An admission that the life you hope for requires something you haven't been able to find or create for yourself in any other way. An alcoholic who is ready for recovery knows that she has let her family down in dramatic and destructive ways. A chronic over-eater who is ready for help has to admit that he's tried every diet and cannot find enough self-control to succeed on his own. Each of them knows that they are locked in a prison of destructive patterns. Finally, they must look to a higher power outside themselves if they're going to break free.

For a long time now, our branch of the Christian tradition has not talked much about sin. We saw that beating people with moral sticks to convince them of their need for forgiveness didn't lead them to the loving God we want them to know. This is a good and truthful change, I think. I don't believe that the Christian story begins with the pronouncement of God's judgment of us as unworthy creatures. But maybe we've lost along the way an ability to name truthfully who we are—broken in some fundamental way. That what we need, and what faith offers, is something more than a few suggestions for how to upgrade the quality of an already-just-fine life.

The truth is, we are all stuck in some way—addicted to something that keeps us from living full, freely-chosen lives. If it's not a chemical substance, then it's something else: recognition, control, achievement, a particular self-image, an unhealthy relationship.

Sometimes my life feels sort of like that younger brother's: bad habits and self-indulgent excess. Sometimes I think I'm more like the older brother—stuck inside the bars of my own rigid expectations about how I and everyone else in the world should behave. Either way, I cannot manufacture for myself the joy and deep fulfillment and spontaneous gratitude that I want to live in. I can't. I have tried. My name is Kathi, and I'm addicted to a whole bunch of things that keep me from loving God and the people that I want desperately to love well.

I long for this church to be a place where we can authentically acknowledge to one another that on our own, we haven't been able to make our lives work very well. To recognize that what we need, ultimately, is not to muscle ourselves into self-improvement, but to *allow* ourselves to *be changed*. That's where the 12 steps start. It's where Christianity starts too, but somehow, over the years, the language of the church has gotten hard to understand. Its words have gotten too holy, too mystified, so either obscure or over-used that we can no longer hear what they mean.

So for these weeks of summer, we're going to try another language, one that may be more natural to our everyday ears. We're going to talk in the language of 12 steps, the path to freedom that Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous and AlAnon members talk about. I think you will hear the same wisdom you may have heard before in church, but in sometimes different words.

We are all lost. We all long for home, to be seen for exactly who we are, and even so—with all our failings out on the table—to be invited personally into a life that feels like dancing and delight. So whichever of those brothers in Jesus' story you identify with, wherever you have been up until now, if you're ready to say, "This isn't really working,"—lay it on the table. Come in. The prodigal God is waiting for you, the God who is always ready to welcome a lost child home—not with judgment or skepticism about your motives, but with wild, reckless extravagance. With love.

Resources for this sermon and for further reading:

Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God*, Dutton, 2008

Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace*, HarperOne, 1988

J. Keith Miller, *A Hunger for Healing*, Harper San Francisco, 1991

Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, St. Anthony Messenger Pres, 1989, 2005