

June 5

The Allure of a Far Country

Luke 15:11-32

This past year I led a discussion group based on a study by Brian McLaren. When we came to the story of the Prodigal Son we talked about the many layers of meaning to be found in this story. I said, "You could preach a sermon series on this parable." The group challenged me to do just that. So, for the next few weeks, I will be reading the Parable of the Prodigal Son from a different translation and then discussing one part of the story. Today we talk about the allure of a far off country.

The parable begins: there was a father who had two sons. The younger son is getting restless. He has an itch that he wants to scratch. Working hard on the family farm for many more years waiting for Dad to die so he gets his inheritance has no appeal. So he approaches his father and asks, some versions say demands, his share of the inheritance now. It was a rude thing to do. It was even a cruel thing to do because he was implying that he wished his father dead! The father could have rejected the request but instead gives the son his inheritance. Soon the son packs up and heads off to a far country.

Throughout time people have been drawn into trouble by the allure of a far country. We hear and sometimes believe, "the grass is greener on the other side of the fence." The young man had all that he needed. He was loved, fed, and had meaningful work. Why would he find the far off country to be so appealing? That's the question for all of us. Temptation is all about the allure of what we don't currently have. I recall a teacher saying this. "I hate Brussels sprouts. They have no ability to tempt me. You could offer me all the Brussels sprouts in the world if I would do one little thing and I would not change my behavior one bit. Now if instead of Brussels sprouts you offered me chocolate, then I would have to be on my guard. I am tempted by chocolate and it would be easy for me to justify changing my actions to get some. I know the threat is real because when I was on a diet I had a hot fudge sundae. I justified it because it was hot, I had worked hard, and I deserved it!"

For the young man the allure was for the exotic, the different. Life at home was way too tame. He had heard about women with loose morals and parties that lasted all

night and that seemed way more exciting than what he was doing. Yes, home was secure but it seemed boring in comparison to what might be. Now I am sure he had a talk with himself before leaving. He would set up boundaries for his behavior. He would go this far but no farther. Spend this much but no more. He was mature and sensible. He didn't plan to reject everything his father taught him. He just wanted a bit more pizzazz out of life. No harm in that, is there? I am trying to help us realize how easy it is to start down that road that ultimately leads you far from home.

Where is your far off country? What are the things that tempt you to move from a place of security and values? Where have you taken a first step? When you talk to people who have committed great crimes they never started in a big way or with the intent to really do something wrong. I remember reading about a person who had embezzled thousands from the club where she was a treasurer. How did it start? They ran a concession stand on Saturday and at the end of the day she took home the receipts to bank on Monday. Sunday night her daughter reminded her she needed to take money to school to purchase her yearbook. The school wanted cash, no checks. She didn't have the cash on hand and she didn't feel like running to the ATM. The concession receipts were in her desk drawer. She gave her daughter the money from the receipts. She planned to repay it the next day. Monday was hectic, she ran into the bank and made the deposit and then to a meeting. Later that night she realized she had not put back the money. She planned to, but then thought about how she volunteered more hours than anyone else and never got a thank you. The concession bag became her private funding source. Someone, after a couple of years, realized that though they were as busy as ever the amount deposited was way down. They worked with the bank and put in a marked bill. It was not deposited. When confronted she confessed. She hadn't meant to, but it was so easy to justify the beginning step.

We all have to ignore the allure of a far off country. We have to say no to that which tempts us. The first steps are so easy to justify. Saying no and not taking the journey is a lot easier than what happens later to the young man.

This leads to the big theological question. "Why doesn't God stop us?" When we read the story of the prodigal son we always assume that the father in the story represents God. When the father runs to his returning son, embraces him and

welcomes him home, we want the assurance that God will do the same for us if we do fall prey to the allure of that far off country. What we fail to think about is God is also the father who gives in to the son's request, gives him his inheritance and watches as he packs up and leaves. All along God could have stopped the son. He could have refused his request so the son would have had no money to squander. In the laws of those times the father could have forbidden the son to leave and he would have had to have been obeyed. The father's authority over the son was absolute. The parable does not say the son ran away at night. No he left, the father knew he left, and the worried father spent his days afterwards watching the road the son had taken hoping he would soon return. Why does our God allow us, when God can stop us, to head down that wrong path, to give into temptations, those allures of a far off country?

This is one of the great questions of faith. The parable does not answer the question but in the actions of the father and in other places in the Bible we see at least some of the reasons that God, in the guise of the father, did not stop the son from leaving. These are some of the same reasons that God ultimately allows us to make our own decisions when it comes to how we handle the allure of a far off country.

From the beginning of the story of God's relationship to humankind we hear that God gives us the gift of free choice. We see this first with Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. God places the tree of knowledge in the garden and then tells them to not eat of it. They have a choice. They know they are supposed to say no to temptation. So God decided we should be given the gift of free choice and most of the time we celebrate this gift and use it well. None of us would want to be a pre-programmed robot doing what we are told to do. Free choice means God trusts us. Free choice means we have a part to play in the decisions we make. Free choice means that when we say yes to something, we really mean it. All this is good. But when temptations enter into things, we do not always celebrate this gift. Instead we want God to turn off the option just then. Isn't there a part of us that wishes God never put that one tree in the garden so we would still have a shot at living in paradise?

Since God is a loving parent, God understands the value in learning to say no. When we see temptations and say no, we gain in character and in wisdom. We all know that the school of hard knocks is a challenging school but it teaches its lessons well.

Think how hard it is for God to let us make mistakes. The heart of God must have broken when Eve and then Adam ate the forbidden fruit.

God also wants us to own and claim our victories. When we do the right thing we feel wonderful. To learn to resist temptations and to grow in faith is what we are about.

Later in our series we will also hear the value in learning from our mistakes. But for now we recall there is that far off country. It looks wonderful until you actually are living there. It is really easy to start down that road that will take you to this place. Little decisions, seemingly unimportant ones are how it begins. Finally you are a long way from home. All those boundaries you thought you had set up, all that so called maturity that would allow you to dabble just a bit but not really get in trouble have collapsed. Go far enough down that road and suddenly the allure of a far off country doesn't seem that spectacular. You begin to realize all that you have given up. That boring, predictable yet loving home is starting to look pretty good. No one plans to end up in a pigsty feeding pigs! That is not what tempts us but as we see people's lives crash and burn because of choices they make we realize how this can happen.

Knowing what can happen when we let the allure of a far off place causes us to think about the cost of leaving home. We need to pray every day for help from God to say no to that which tempts us. Even more, we need the grace to celebrate what we have and realize that the blessings of faith and integrity far outweigh anything we might be offered. It was a lesson Adam and Eve had to learn. It is a lesson the Prodigal Son had to learn. Hopefully it is a lesson we don't have to learn because we stay close to God, our loving parent.