

Repenting Our Poor Choices

Luke 15:1-2, 11b-24

Farmville Baptist Church

March 20, 2022

It's been a pretty good time to be a basketball fan in the state of Virginia, hasn't it? We're thrilled, of course, with our hometown Longwood Lancers, both the men's and the women's teams, for winning their respective Big South tournaments and getting to the Big Dance! They joined a slew of Virginia schools, including my alma mater Virginia Tech in both the men's and women's tourneys, and the University of Richmond Spiders even pulled an upset in the first round! I know March Madness didn't quite end for all of our Farmville and Virginia teams as we may have hoped it would, but we can be proud of them nonetheless for having

great seasons and being great teams of young men and women.

The best basketball clip I saw this week had nothing to do with the bevy of highlights from the NCAA Tournament, though. Earlier this week, a friend of mine retweeted a video of a girls' rec league game, shot on a fan-held cell phone. In the clip, one team in-bounds the ball to a girl, probably around 9 or 10, around the foul line. She immediately throws up a shot – and it swishes through the net! As soon as she sees it go through, she turns and runs halfway down the court where her dad, who is also her coach, has taken a couple steps out onto the floor. She leaps into his arms as they both are ecstatic, holding that hug for a few seconds. Then she steps down and goes back onto the court, wiping happy tears out of her eyes. The video's caption says, "My

baby girl hitting her first shot in a game, my baby I love you.”¹

It’s a wonderful video, and its quite appropriate that it was posted on the account GoodNewsCorrespondent. The joy in the video is almost palpable, and any parent can feel some solidarity with the dad in the video who sees his child accomplish something and step forward to wrap them in a celebratory hug. But, of course, not all shots go in the basket, and not every moment in life is filled with joy. There are many tragedies in life, some of our own making. Today’s Scripture passage is a story Jesus told about another parent and child, and what happened when the child ran into ~~the~~ *their* father’s embrace.

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https://twitter.com/GoodNewsCorres1/status/1502985490194219017?fbclid=IwAR28C2zQmdQJyXDYyuSyE7XgKIXGbvCcopxkADw_oAH5fI0vxIk0bc0yq4

The story is actually the third in a series of stories Jesus told when he overheard the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttering. These were the members of the religious establishment of his day, the good, upstanding, well-thought-of folks in the towns and villages. Jesus had been going from town to town, preaching good news about God's kingdom and performing miraculous acts of healing and wholeness...and, as you can imagine, he drew a crowd. That crowd was not always the buttoned-up, well-heeled, spit-and-polish membership of the synagogue, though – they were the folks who were outcasts, people who had made some choices in life that set them outside of polite society. Jesus was spending time with the tax collectors and sinners, and the religious people didn't think very much of that at all. Like far too many of us religious people are prone to do, they

threw Jesus some side eye while they muttered together, “*This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.*”²

In reply, Jesus told them a series of stories about the importance to God of reaching, not those already close to home, found, but those who have wandered and may even be lost. He starts with a story of sheep, then of coins, but the story that is most memorable, the story that is most powerful, is the story of a man and two sons. It’s such a familiar and powerful parable that we’ll spend two weeks on it, one per son, because each part of the story captures a part of what Jesus was trying to teach the Pharisees and religious scholars that day – and in this season of repentance, each part of the story teaches us something, too.

The story starts with the father’s younger son. We’ll learn more about the older son next week, but this younger

² Luke 15:2

son was...well, he was a bit of a self-centered brat, to be honest. He knew what he wanted – to go and enjoy life, with little thought of how it would affect anyone in the long term – and he knew how to get what he wanted – he needed resources. Those resources would come to him eventually, as the second heir of his apparently wealthy father, but to receive his share of the estate would require patience. The younger son had no patience. So he went to his father and asked for his share of the inheritance, *now*.

You've likely heard a sermon on this parable before, so I won't go into the intricacies of inheritance customs in that day and age. Suffice to say, this simply *was not done*. A son, even a younger son who would not inherit his father's title or station in life, would never be so callous and self-centered as to ask for his inheritance early, especially if the purpose of getting the inheritance was to go and blow it on wild living –

or squander it, as the parable says. Such a choice would signal grave disrespect for his father and complete disregard for the younger son's responsibility to his family and community. But despite knowing what people would think, despite knowing the pain such a request and path of action would cause to his father, the son chose to take what was coming to him ^{early} and squander it on his own pleasure, his own passing happiness, his own whim of the moment.

We could spend all day speculating what the younger son did in that far distant country, joining the religious leaders to look down our noses at this stereotypical 'sinner.' Indeed, the man's own older brother will do some speculating of his own next week. But we don't need to spend time there – because the specifics of the younger brother's rebellious spirit and selfish choices aren't the point. It's enough to know that what he did wasn't in his own best interests,

weren't what his loving father desired for him, and weren't, ultimately, satisfying or sustaining. The young man made some choices – and he ends up at rock bottom. “After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 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.”³

Have you ever been where the young man was? Have I? I'm sure we don't have to think very hard to bring to mind a time when we made a choice that didn't exactly turn out well – that hurt someone else, and that hurt us, and that left us wondering if we had reached rock bottom. Now, each of us will have our own *unique* experience of rock bottom – but we've all

³ Luke 15:14-16

made poor choices in life that caused harm to us and to those we care about. We've done things, or said things, or tried things, or squandered things, that we thought, in the moment, we would enjoy or benefit from but which, in retrospect, we recognize were not at all the best or the most uplifting or the most responsible things to do.

It's a bad feeling to have that realization, isn't it?

You see, it would be easy to think that the young son in this parable is only going home because he used up all his money and is now broke. Sure, that's part of it – but we are told that he had a realization, an epiphany, almost. And it wasn't just about economics, though that was part of it. It was about what he had learned. He learned that, cut off from home by his own choice, he was now adrift in the world – and the world doesn't care at all that he is lost. As author Henri Nouwen puts it,

“The younger son became fully aware of how lost he was when no one in his surroundings showed the slightest interest in him. They noticed him only as long as he could be used for their purposes. But when he had no money left to spend and no gifts left to give, he stopped existing for them. [...] When no one wanted to give him the food he was giving to the pigs, the younger son realized that he wasn’t even considered a fellow human being. [...] When the younger son was no longer considered a human being by the people around him, he felt the profundity of his isolation, the deepest loneliness one can experience. He was truly lost, and it was this complete lostness that brought him to his senses. [...] He had become so disconnected from what gives life – family, friends, community, acquaintances, and even

food – that he realized that death would be the natural next step.”⁴

Caught in the consequences of his choices, and aware that the world far from his father’s house cared not one iota for the person he was, the son realized that continuing that path was choosing death. To continue was to let his poor choices define him and determine his fate.

But he had another choice: he could turn around. He could step back from the brink, back from the abyss.

We’ve spoken already this Lenten season about the notion of repentance being at the core of the Gospel, the good news Jesus came to bring. Repentance, at its most basic, is exactly what the younger son did here: it’s a turning around from one path and turning back to another. The younger son had gone off to a country far distant from his

⁴ Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 47

father's home, and it brought only lostness and death. To turn back from that, to turn towards home – that was a turn towards life, and joy, and wholeness, and peace. That's the other path he could choose, the other path we can choose.

But, the son wondered, would he be welcome back home? But, we wonder alongside him, will our poor choices keep us from being invited in once we return?

It's easy enough to speculate what the Pharisees and religious scholars would have said – the people so offended by Jesus' choice of eating companions. They couldn't stand the idea of a religious man, a rabbi, even associating with tax collectors, who had betrayed their people and swindled them to boot, and other sinners of all stripes. Allow them back into the fold? Never!

But that's not what happened in the story Jesus told them. As the son heads back home, uncertain of what awaits

him there, planning a contingency that might provide a basic life even though he thinks every bridge has been burned, we find that the son's father is watching for him. We don't know how long he has looked – probably for a long ~~time~~^{time,} since the son has been gone long enough to go to a far distant country, blow through whatever inheritance he received, slog it out in a menial job for long enough to hit rock bottom and come to his senses, and return home from the distant country. In other words, it's been a ~~long time~~^{while}.

And still, the father watched. He watched with hope beyond hope. He watched with baited breath. He watched with the sort of expectation that is utterly illogical yet deeply held – that one day, somehow, someday, this boy he loved so much would come home. It didn't matter that his son had snubbed him, had degraded the family, had likely done things that the father despised; he still wanted his boy to

come home, and if by some miracle he did, the father would see him because he was keeping a lookout.

And then, one day...could it be? Who is that off in the distance, this travel-stained, malnourished, exhausted wanderer? Could it...could it be his boy? “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”⁵

You know, I don't know if there is a more beautiful verse in all of Scripture than that one.

Sit in that moment with me. A young son, covered in the dust of the road and filled with shame and hunger. A father, weeping with joy as his boy has come home. An embrace, holding these two bodies, these two hearts, these two lives, together.

⁵ Luke 15:20

Then the son opens his mouth, fumbling out the words he had rehearsed the whole way home. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son...”⁶ He gets no further. The father isn’t listening. The father is giving instructions – instructions for a celebration! His son, long thought lost, is home again.

Notice a few things about this. Nothing the father does here eliminates the consequences of the son’s poor choices. The fortune has been squandered. The malnutrition has left its mark. The trauma of the lonely, possibly abused, certainly exploited son remains. His poor choices have marked him, in a way, left scars on his soul. But his relationship with the father – the relationship he threw in the gutter for the promise of a hedonistic life, the

⁶ Luke 15:21

relationship so hurt by the son's callous disregard and disrespect – it is restored.

What restores it?

The love of the father – unlimited, unconditional love – and the return of the son.

We, of course, recognize and celebrate the father's love – a stand-in for God, certainly. Long has he stared at the horizon, looking for his child. Quick did his feet run, as he saw his son appear. Tight was his embrace, welcoming the boy home. The father's love is utterly extravagant and holy – a love Nouwen describes as “a love that existed before any rejection was possible and that will still be there after all rejections have taken place. [...] It is the love that always welcomes home and always wants to celebrate.”⁷ The love of

⁷ Nouwen, 108-109.

the father for his wayward son is absolutely the foundation of the restored relationship.

Yet for that love to have a chance, the son had to turn for home. Notice he didn't have to meet some preconceived notions of retribution or suffer ridicule for his poor choices. He didn't even have to make it all the way home – his father met him “a long way off”! But the younger son did have to do one thing: he did have to step away from one path and turn back to another. He had to repent. And with that repentance, that recognition that he was heading in a wrong direction, was making poor choices, ^{that choice} ~~and he chose~~ to turn back towards the right, the door was open for the love of the father – the love of God – to come crashing in.

That, my friends, is what repentance is all about.

So today, I want to invite each of us to take a moment and reflect on the things we have done that haven't been the

best choices we've ever made. We'll have time in the weeks ahead to reflect on other things, choices we have made in other areas of life. But today, I want us to reflect on our poor choices in life. Is there something that led you down a path that broke your relationship with someone else? Is there something that led you away from God? Is there something you decided to do that hurt someone else – or that hurt you? Is there a part of your life, your habits, your worldview or perspective that you've embraced that keeps you from the way of Jesus? Take a moment to join me in thinking about our poor choices, and then join me in following the example of the prodigal son. Repent with me of our poor choices. Turn for home...and walk into the loving embrace of our Father.

Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever felt like you've hit rock bottom? What did that feel like? If you stepped away from that experience, what helped you?

2. How do we react when we encounter people who have made poor choices in life? Do we exploit them? Judge them? Avoid them? Encourage them? Love them?