

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 5-5-21



Dear Friends in Christ,

One of the best illustrations of leaving/not leaving is the parable Jesus told of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. Much of it seems obvious, but there are some powerful subtleties within the story as well. And both sides of the coin—leaving and not leaving—are contained in the story.

Clearly the younger son leaves physically when he takes his share of the inheritance and goes to live elsewhere. Like a rebellious is time away is spent doing what he wants and how he wants to do it until he hits bottom. But his leaving echoes what many go through when separating from parents and the son does so in the extreme. His request for his share of the inheritance is more than just, “I need money to move out.” To make such a request is really to say to his father, “Drop dead.” It was unthinkable for a son to ask for an inheritance before his father passes on. So, he not only is rejecting his father, but also the traditions and practices of his family. It is a severing of physical, emotional, and cultural ties. He is rejecting his past to find out who he is and who he wants to be.

Sometimes true leaving happens when we are forced to make some serious choices. When the son runs out of money, he is confronted with those questions of identity and character. He recognizes what he had at home and the value of the traditions of his family. He makes the decision to return to what he knew, even if it is just in small ways by seeking to be treated only as one of the servants. This young man, however, is blessed to be welcomed back and given the opportunity to

have all those values and traditions restored. Now, though, he lives in that family environment, not because his father says to, but because he has chosen to live that way. In leaving, he has been able to come home and choose to live in the company of his father.

The not leaving part can be seen in the older brother. He remains at home, doing everything his father expects of him, but he fails to identify and embrace the practices and character of his father. When his wayward brother returns and is welcomed with kindness and forgiveness, he shows that he has not made his own choice about who he will be. He resents the grace extended to his brother, even though it clearly demonstrates the nature and values of his father. He has been faithful to his father only on the surface, but has never left to find and claim who he will be. At least, that's where the story ends. The father shares why he has offered such caring and grace, and invites his oldest son to choose, to make his own decision about the identity he wishes for himself. Rejection or acceptance. Judgment or forgiveness. Self-centered, holier-than-thou individuality or gracious, mercy, and compassion.

That is really the situation for all of us, especially when it comes to our relationship with God. We can evaluate the values and traditions in which we were raised, and then decide whether we will adopt them as our own apart from our parents, or reject them. More than this is our personal commitment to God or not. When we come to that point of deciding about God the Father, it can come after a time of complete rejection (and some never choose to come back), or a gradual deciding to make God a part of our mature life (or not), or it can simply remain something that we continue in because that's how we were raised. When we can leave and then decide for ourselves the place God will have in our life will shape tremendously who we will be for going forward into full adulthood.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey