

When something turns out to be the opposite of what we expect, we face a form of *reversal*. *Reversals* are like *big reveals* because they change our understanding of **everything, and our expectations are turned upside down**. When this happens, we suddenly see things in a new light and reality changes in an instant. Such forms of reversal are threaded throughout Luke's telling of the Jesus story. Luke's gospel assures us that the kingdom of God, in its fullness, will **confound** our expectations and **overturn** our understanding of life experiences. Things will seemingly be turned upside down. This is especially true when it comes to power, privilege, wealth, merits, and rewards. Luke assures us time and again that in God's kingdom those who struggle in life now – those who are at the bottom or on the fringes of society – will suddenly find themselves at the top and in the center. Beginning with Mary's astounding, prophetic Magnificat, then throughout the entirety of Luke's telling of the Jesus story, this great reversal is articulated.

In today's gospel reading, we get yet another example of the reversal of expectations in God's kingdom. Today, Jesus speaks to us about getting lost and, of all the parables Jesus preached, the

story of the Prodigal Son is perhaps the most profound. Today's story tells of a father who had two sons. In this parable, the younger son asks for his share of his father's estate. He comes to his father and says, "Father, divide the inheritance between me and my brother and give it to me now." In effect, he is saying, "Dear Dad, drop dead now, legally speaking." As a parent, when I look at what the youngest son is demanding, I can imagine there is something within his father that dies when hearing this. Anyway, the youngest son gets the money, and the older brother gets the farm and the family business. The younger brother goes off exploring the world and ends up spending all his inheritance on wild, thrill-seeking living. He ultimately ends up in want, working a job where he is slopping hogs for a farmer. Now it is important to remember that pigs were an abomination to the Jews and people who cared for swine were cursed. So, in this story, we are given a picture of a young man who is hungry, destitute, and cursed as he is sitting in the filth of a pigsty while envying the very slop he gives the pigs. **All** his resources have been depleted and he reaches the point where he must face his mistakes and failures. It is in that place that he has a revelation. For this wayward son, that filthy pigsty, that ditch of life, becomes a place of revelation!

When he finally comes to his senses he says, "This is crazy. How many hired **servants** does my father have who all have bread enough to spare and I'm perishing here with hunger? I know what I'm going to do." So, he develops yet one more scheme for his life. He decides he will go to his father and say, "Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you. And I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me one of your hired servants." He knows he has been as dead in the eyes of his father, and he **doubts** he can ever again go back and live as a son. Therefore, he tells himself, "I will now go back and work to **earn** my father's favor again. I will be a good **servant** and do whatever is possible."

What happens next is that, from a **distance**, the father sees the son returning. Luke writes that while the younger son *"was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him."* Did you notice the father never says a single word to the younger son? The father's **actions** tell the whole story by his physical welcome and embrace. His actions alone say, "I have found my son." And did you notice that the son never even gets a word out of his mouth until **after** his father's embrace. What a testimony to the Father's love. The son's

confession is **not** a pre-condition of forgiveness. His confession comes **after** he discovers he has already **been** forgiven. Confession is **not** something we do to get forgiveness. The truth is we **have already** been forgiven. The act of confession is something we do to **celebrate** the forgiveness we have already received. You see, there is **nothing** we can do to **earn** forgiveness. When we know how much we have been forgiven, we **want** to turn back to God. This is truly a reversal of our assumptions and our expectations.

Well, what happens next is also astounding. The father, **saying not a word to the son**, turns to the **servants** and says, "Bring the best robe, bring a ring for his finger and shoes for his feet, kill the fatted calf and let us eat and be merry for this, **my son**, was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found." This son, the seemingly good for nothing son, is home. He has been raised from the dead by his father's embrace. He has done **nothing** to earn it, and all that matters is that the father has called for a party to celebrate the finding of the lost.

Yes, it is the father's **will to have a party!** Everything is fine and the celebration is in full swing. However, now the older brother re-enters the story. He comes up, hears the music and the dancing,

sees the wait staff serving platters of food and fine wine, and asks one of the servants, "What is this all about? I didn't plan a party." The servant says, "No, no, your brother has come home, and your father has killed the fatted calf because your brother is back, safe and sound." Then, oh my, this older brother is so like us. He is focused on achievement, merit, and reward, and he gets angry and refuses to go into the house. He will not join the party. Instead, he gets out his score card. He says to his father, "Look, all these years I served you. I never broke one of your commandments and you never even gave me a goat that I might have a party with my friends. But when this, **your son**" - notice he doesn't say, this my brother - he says, "when this, your son, cuts off his relationship, this your son who has wasted his inheritance with riotous living, wasted **all** you gave him with prostitutes, when this son comes home, you kill the fatted calf and throw a party!" The father then responds, saying, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we **had** to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

This is a stunning story of reversal regarding our expectations of what God is like. You see, God is **always with** the lost. There is no

point at which God will ever stop following and pursuing us. God will **always** seek the lost. The reversal theme in Luke's gospel is all about a God who lavishly showers us with forgiveness and grace and will never give up on **anyone**. And this God will always **shatter** our expectations because Jesus turns a spirituality of climbing, achieving, and perfection – as with the older son – upside down. The one who has done wrong and is humbled about it is the one who is forgiven, transformed, lifted up, and rewarded. Those who are proud of how they have done everything right, but also feel superior to others or feel they are now entitled, are not open to God's blessing. When commenting on this story, Richard Rohr writes:

This is Jesus' Great Reversal theme. He turns religion itself on its head. We thought we came to God by doing it right, and lo and behold, surprise of surprises, we come to God by doing it wrong—and growing because of it! The only things strong enough to break open our heart are things like pain, mistakes, unjust suffering, tragedy, failure, and the general absurdity of life. I wish it were not so, but it clearly is. Fortunately, life will lead us to the edge of our own resources through such events. We must be led to an experience or situation that *we cannot fix or control or understand*. **That's where faith begins.** Up to that moment it has just been religion!

God is **always** there with arms outstretched in welcome, ready to receive us with forgiveness, grace, love, and celebration. Come home to love. This is **the** place where the deepest joy in life is found!