

Luke 15: 11-24
September 18, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

During the summer I have been addressing the question of how we can listen to scripture in such a way that we actually *recognize* and *respond* to God's speaking to our hearts. For this to happen we need to recognize that listening to a passage from the Bible and the preacher's reflection on that passage is not a passive activity. You do not sit back in your pew waiting for something to happen. When the scripture is read and the sermon preached you *expect* something to happen. You expect to experience some movement within your thoughts and emotions, what is often called a *resonance*. *Resonance* literally means a "resounding." Resonance happens when the spiritual message of God's word "re-sounds" in your heart.

Sometimes this resonance is wonderfully affirming. It is like a letter from home on a lonely day. It brings a reassurance that you are on the right path in a confusing and conflicted situation or on firm ground in a crazy world. Resonance in this sense often brings a lifting of heart, a sense that you are not alone. Indeed it awakens the sense that maybe there really is a God who loves you and who wants you to experience more and more of his love and be less and less bound to the fears and cravings of this worldly life.

When we experience God's word in this way we realize that that which is responding in us is actually the presence of God. We call it the image or likeness of God. It is that within us which is given to every human being to tune into the God channel. It is standard equipment in every person.

The problem is that in our culture we have come to believe that all this God stuff is at best a nice illusion with which we deaden the essential meaninglessness of life. At worst it is an insidious justification for human cruelty in small and large scale ways. Vast numbers of people, no longer expect to hear anything beyond day to day life. They have come to believe that there is no God channel. And when you or I approach such person they think we are trying to get them to join a cult and to convert them to some rigid moralistic set of rules.

Frankly, there is very little we can do about this. We cannot control anybody's life path. But we can do this: we can cultivate our own open-ness to listening for God's loving desire to communicate with us. We can expect to experience the resonance between the sound that comes through our ears during the reading of scripture and the response within us. And when this happens we can become curious about the experience. What parts of our lives are touched? Is there a lifting of a sense of heaviness in relation to a certain situation? Do we feel a prompting to do something? Do we breathe a little easier? Do we feel a calling to re-commit ourselves to tuning into the God channel on a daily basis?

As I read the parable of the prodigal son and his unconditionally loving father I was struck by how contemporary this story is. Remember that, like the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, this story is laid alongside of the grumbling of the religious leaders that Jesus is meeting with tax collectors and sinners. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep which are not lost and goes after the one who is; the woman scours the house for the one missing coin. In both cases the finding of the sheep and the coin is the occasion for great celebration. Jesus proclaims that when a lost soul repents and turns to God there is a similar rejoicing in heaven. Such is the yearning of God that not one soul be lost.

In the parable of the lost son there is a significant difference. Unlike the sheep who wanders off in ignorance or the coin which has been misplaced, the son in this story willfully chooses his path. He feels oppressed by living under his father's roof. He cannot stand the idea that his entire life will be tied to tending this estate. He is also the younger brother so he will always, so he thinks, be under his older brother's thumb. His dissatisfaction reaches such an intensity that he tells his father that he cannot wait for him to die in order to receive his inheritance. He wants the inheritance *now*. Such a demand was unthinkable in Jesus' day. Those who heard it would be appalled at the outrageous demand. They would expect the father to be angry and maybe disinherit the son altogether.

Imagine the confusion and perhaps outrage of those hearers when Jesus tells them that this is not the father's reaction! Not only does the father *not* disinherit this son, he splits his assets between the two sons. The younger son takes the money and runs. From that moment on there is no communication between the son and the father. The life the son leads is the life of one who has no relationship with a spiritual power beyond his or her own experience. Eventually the son runs through his money. All his good time friends disappear and in the wonderful words of the King James Version, "he began to be in *want*." Our translation says that he began to be *in need*. This misses so much. *Want* is a state of being. In a state of want all of our energy goes into simply surviving day to day. Want is a yawning and bottomless pit. The word "need" hardly scratches the surface of the spiritual despair of the condition of want.

Want cannot be dispelled by money and food alone. Indeed it is the illusion that we have all we need in this life that leads so many to a state of want. There lurks in the heart the secret fear that, no matter how much we have, it is not enough. We fear becoming destitute

and abandoned. We fear that we do not have enough saved for retirement or that the bottom will drop from the stock market again. For those of us who are not so secure there is a more present worry that the wolf of want is at the door. And so we try all the harder to secure our circumstances with the nagging fear that whatever we do it will not be enough. We become jealous of those who have more. We are angry that people in need are undermining our security. The frightening fact may be we may be living in the most prosperous country in the history of the world, *we are actually finding ourselves in the condition of the younger son. "He would gladly have fed himself on the pods the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything."* Isn't it the worst of both worlds to have all the outward blessings of affluence and not to be able to enjoy it and share the blessing with others? How horrible to be living in comfort yet inside to be in *want!*

I began by speaking of resonance as a joyful lifting of spirits, a sense that we are not alone. Yet in classic spiritual teaching the fear and anger and hopelessness we feel in this painful state can be God's way of waking up to the folly of our path. This happens to the son. He is utterly miserable. He could have done a number of things other than go home. Instead his suffering causes him to "come to his senses." He turns to go home. This is the most important step we can take—to turn away from contemplating our misery and journey back toward God and our true home.

It turns out that the father never gave up on the son. Nor does God give up on us. Not only that, but just as the father never stopped looking for the son, so God never stops looking to welcome us home.

Amen!