

TEXT: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
THEME: The journey of self discovery
SUBJECT: Wake up calls
TITLE: Sensory Overload

Fourth Sunday in Lent
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Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

“When he came to himself . . .” The journey of self discovery begins with a love of the truth. Seeking the truth means being curious about what is going on in ourselves and around us.

If we are observant, we will see that many of the stock explanations we give for our behavior are a form of resistance. They are a way of avoiding seeing more deeply into our current state. For example, I may, like the older brother, be angry with my father, but a deeper truth might be, “I love him and desperately want his love.”

The journey of self discovery may take us over some long and winding roads until we can say we are angry with our fathers or with God. We may have to travel into the far country and come to the end of the line before we can acknowledge the love beneath the anger.

This is where we find the younger son. Biblical scholars debate whether he is contrite or conniving. We are accustomed to hearing his rehearsal of contrition as sincere and the story to be about repentance and forgiveness.

First century hearers of the story may have heard the younger son’s “coming to himself” as a recovery of his conniving strategies. He knows Daddy will do anything he asks. Daddy still has more money, and he might be able to get more.

Scholars on this side of the debate contend that the line “I have sinned against heaven and before you,” is an allusion to the empty words uttered by Pharaoh in order to stop the plagues. David Buttrick concisely summarizes the prodigal’s strategy: “I’ll go to Daddy and sound religious.”

This may strike us as a cynical interpretation, but if we are honest we can recognize the strategy. Like Pharaoh, like the younger son, we will say or do anything to escape the pain of the moment, but once the pain is gone we return to the very behaviors that led to our suffering.

We are very adept at avoiding the truth of our lives. I suspect many of us can recognize Ian Frazier’s description of his grandmother who did not believe in depression. Denial has been a useful strategy of survival for many but it leaves us in the far country, alienated from reality.

We might also recognize his description of his parents. If his mother fell into a gloom, she usually nurtured it into a dark and stationary front that hung over the kitchen for days. Nurturing the gloom is also a strategy of avoidance.

His father's strategy was to move from a regular level of depression as much farther down the scale as he could possibly go, getting more depressed and thinking up consequent sorrows and disasters of every kind until he reached a near panic state. Then when he came to himself again, and looked at the actual situation, it seemed not so terrible at all.

When Kim Stafford visited his daughter Rosie at college, she showed him the pine tree that had saved her. It was a rangy "Digger Pine" in front of the library. At a low point, Rosie told him, when all seemed wrong, and her life far from what she wanted, she had come one night to stand before this tree, and gradually she came back to herself.

Jesus describes the younger son as "coming to himself," a medical phrase that suggests a return to his right mind after an illness or delirium. He recognizes he is lost and desires to return home. "Coming to himself" may also be translated "coming to his senses."

When I was about seven our family was invited to dinner at the home of a family in the church where my father was pastor. As we made our way down the road to this home, my nose alerted me we were entering unfamiliar territory. This family lived and worked on a pig farm. Coming to one's senses on a pig farm is quite a wake up call.

The father in this story allows his son to fail and fall into unimaginable misery. This father would be considered irresponsible by today's standards. Surely, a man of his means and connections could have arranged an intervention to prevent such humiliation and sorrow, not to mention the danger of death.

If Jesus intends for us to understand the father in this story as an image of God, we must pause for a moment and wonder about this God. This God grants his children the freedom they desire and allows them to bear the consequences of abusing that freedom.

I'm betting there isn't a parent in this room that would allow a daughter or son to fall so far into the muck and mire and stench of life, even if that is what is required for her to come to her senses.

"When he came to himself . . ." implies we can live alienated from our true self. The journey of self discovery begins with a love of the truth about ourselves.

Jesus gives us a God who does not intervene to save us from this truth, but One who allows us to go as low as it takes to wake us up to reality of our lives.