

“You Can Make A Difference”

February 28, 2010

Scripture Reading: Luke 15:25-32 • Gal 6:1-3

There was a frog that absolutely knew his destiny was to turn in to a handsome young prince. One day he decided to visit a fortuneteller. The fortuneteller brought the frog in and gazed into her crystal ball. She said, “Oh, I see something. You’re going to meet a beautiful young woman.” The frog gets very impatient, “Yes, I knew it. I’m going to become a prince.” The fortuneteller continues, “From the moment she sets eyes on you she will have an insatiable desire to know all about you. She will be compelled to get close to you--you’ll fascinate her. She is about to make a big difference in your life.” The frog gets really excited. He asks, “Where am I? At a singles club?” The fortuneteller answers, “No, Biology lab.”

Many of us can probably remember someone who has made a difference in our lives. Maybe it was a teacher, maybe a close friend, maybe somebody where we work, maybe even just a chance encounter with a stranger. Maybe just a random act of kindness.

Jesus was a difference-maker. He was a difference-maker to what the religious establishment called sinners; tax collectors, the demon possessed, the sick, the lame. Jesus was a difference-maker to the society of the day, to the culture of the day, to the economics of the time.

One of the most interesting difference-making parables in the Bible is found in the Gospel of Luke. It’s The Parable of the Lost Son, sometimes called The Parable of the Prodigal Son. Another name for it might be The Parable of What About Me.

Jesus tells the story of a certain man who had two sons. The older son worked hard on the family farm. The younger son was restless - the family farm didn't interest him and the glamour of city life called to him.

One day the younger son went to his father and said:

¹²... 'I want my share of your estate now, instead of waiting until you die.' (Lk 15:12 NLT)

He wants to test his wings. The father, being overly generous, agrees and off the son heads for the city. Soon he is living in the fast lane. He finds friends who are more than willing to help him spend his money. He has a blonde on one arm and a brunette on the other. Wearing all the best clothes and partying all the time.

Eventually his money runs out, he can't party anymore and he loses all his new friends.

Now he is forced find a job just to scrape by; he struggles to feed himself. He takes a job feeding pigs. He is so needy he even longs to eat the food the pigs are eating. Does this sound like anyone you know?

Eventually he comes to his senses; he realizes what he has given up. In humility, he recognizes his stupidity, decides to return to his father and ask for forgiveness and mercy. The father, who had been watching and waiting, welcomes his son back with open arms of compassion. He is overjoyed by the return of his lost son! The father showers his son with gifts and tells the servants to get ready for a big party to celebrate.

Most of us don't really hear the rest of the parable. Luke could have ended the account here and we would have gotten the message; something valuable is lost, it's found, let's party. But that is only part of the message.

Now we get to find out how the other son felt.

²⁸'The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has

squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him! (LK 15:28-30 NIV)

There is no celebration by the older son for the son who has returned. The older brother doesn't even regard him as a brother, "this son of yours". He is bitter, angry and confused.

Again, the father responded with love. He tries to explain to his older son why he celebrated the younger son's return, but also the depth of his love for him, the older son.

³¹***"My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.*** (Lk 15:31 NIV)

The story ends here. We don't know the final outcome. We never really know how the older son responded to his father's love.

But what about, the Older Brother! Compared to his younger brother – this guy is a saint!

- He didn't just pick up and leave
- He didn't waste his father's money
- He didn't bring shame to the family
- He didn't embarrass his family with his actions
- He hasn't done anything wrong...until now!

Sometimes, when I read this parable, I suddenly realize, in some respects, I may have become a little like the older brother, I forget that I was once the one who was lost;

- I envy people who seem to have a better relationship with God than I do.
- I am jealous of people who know more of the Bible than I do.
- I get hung up on how to run the church rather than being the church.
- I find that I am becoming intolerant of people who do not share my faith or view God as I do.
- I forget that my relationship with others should be based on love and compassion.
- That sin in my life is separating me from the Father

And this can happen to any one of us. When this happens we can get so worked up about ourselves that we fall into the same traps the older brother fell into:

1. **Self-Righteous** – He publicly announced the sin of his brother.

³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him! (LK 15:30 NIV)

When we get backed against the wall, how easy is it to start pointing out the failures of others? Trying to put down our fellow brother who has fallen himself.

That's why God's word says in Galatians 6:1

“Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you be tempted.” (Gal 6:1 NASB)

2. **Pride and self-centeredness**– Look at what I have done. The older brother was more concerned about himself than his own brother.

²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. (LK 15:29 NIV)

(Look at all the “I” in verse 29)

3. **Indifference** – He was told by one of the servants that his brother had come home

²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. (LK 15:26 NIV)

4. **Anger** – He was angry with both his father and his brother to the point that he would not go into the house to share in the joy of the homecoming.

²⁸“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. (LK 15:28 NIV)

He was upset with the father – because of the feast – “I deserve a party too” He was upset with his brother – for getting all the attention and getting the gifts. And we can get the same way at times. We start to think:

- God, he doesn’t deserve another chance
- God, why do you bless them – they are new in church?
- God, why am I still struggling while you bless them with a better job or more things
 - I am the one that has been at every church service
 - I am the one that has always taught Sunday school
 - I am the one doing most of the work at church
 - IF anyone deserves a feast, it should be ... me

(Put up cartoon)

This cartoon says a lot about this parable. The son who left home and returned is getting all the attention and gifts from his father. Now look at the older brother in the background. What do you see? Put yourself in his shoes. How do you think he feels?

The cry of the older brother is the same cry we hear in our own communities today. The cry “What about me?” And if you’ll listen closely, you’ll hear a louder cry... It’s the same cry: “What about me?” It’s the cry of:

- A third grade boy who has no father
 - He comes home from school not knowing where his mother is
 - A relative or neighbor is caring him for
 - I would like to know what it’s like to have a male figure in my life.
 - Can you come spend time with me?
 - Can you hear him? “What about me?”

But we can't hear his cry because we are so concerned about our own blessings from God.

- A single mom. Her husband left her with nothing
 - Does anyone care that I am losing my mind?
 - Does anyone care that I have nothing else to live for?
 - Does anyone care that I have kids who are starving?
 - Does anyone care that my life is in shambles?
 - Hey, What about me?
- A girl who has just turned 12 years old
 - I can't help it that I don't go to church
 - My family has never made that a priority
 - My parents don't think it's important
 - Does it bother you that I am not in church?
 - Hey, What about me?
- A former member who quit church all together
 - You don't know why I left because you never asked me
 - You must not care about me since you haven't called
 - I didn't leave mad – I left discouraged! Thinking no one cared about me and must have been right because you haven't stopped by to check ... on me
 - What about Me? Does anyone care?

This was the cry of the older brother and maybe if we just take the time to listen – we can hear the same cry from our community! Maybe it's the cry of someone where you work, someone in your own family, maybe the person sitting next to you. Maybe you're the one secretly crying on the inside. What about Me?

But wait, there is another cry... "Hey, what about me?"

- I gave up heaven for you...
- I was born in a manger for you...
- They talked bad about me
- They beat me

- They crucified me ... and I did it all for you

Can you hear your Savior, Jesus Christ? Can you hear him saying "What about me?"

So how do you respond to Jesus' cry? Who is Jesus calling you to help, to make a difference in their lives? People who don't dress right or talk right or look right or act right? Maybe it's someone in your neighborhood, or some group you read about in the newspapers? Maybe it's to make a difference in the marketplace, to pour everything you have into your kids, to make a difference in the life of a student.

There's a story I heard some time ago by Elizabeth Silance Ballard. It's about a teacher named Miss Thompson and a student named Teddy Stallard who was disinterested in school, who wore wrinkled clothes, whose hair was never combed, unattractive, unmotivated, distant ... just plain hard to like.

Even though his teacher said she loved everybody in her class the same, inside she wasn't really being truthful. Every time she marked Teddy's papers, she got a certain perverse pleasure out of putting XXX's next to the wrong answers, and when she put the F's at the top of the paper, she always did it with a flair. She should have known better.

At the school where Miss Thompson taught, she was required to review each child's past records and she put Teddy's off until last. However, when she reviewed his file, she was in for a surprise.

First Grade: "Teddy is a bright child with a ready laugh, does his work neatly and has good manners... he is a joy to be around.."

Second Grade: "Teddy is an excellent student, well liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother has a terminal illness and life at home must be a struggle."

Third Grade: "His mother's death has been hard on him. He tries to do his best, but his father doesn't show much interest."

Fourth Grade: "Teddy is withdrawn and doesn't show much interest in school. He doesn't have many friends and he sometimes sleeps in class."

By now, Miss Thompson realized the problem and she was ashamed of herself. She felt even worse when Christmas came, and the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's class brought her Christmas presents on her desk and crowded around to watch her open them. Among them was one from Teddy Stallard. She was surprised that he had brought her a gift, but he had. It was wrapped in brown paper, held together with Scotch tape. On the paper were the simple words,

For Miss Thompson from Teddy.

When she opened Teddy's present, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume. Other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk over Teddy's gifts, but Miss Thompson at least had enough sense to silence them by putting on the bracelet, putting some of the perfume on her wrist and holding it up for some of the other children to smell. She said,

Doesn't this smell lovely?

And the children, taking their cue from the teacher, readily agreed.

At the end of the day, when school was over and the other children had left, Teddy lingered. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly,

"Miss Thompson, today you smelled just like my Mom used to."

When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her. Next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a different person. She was now a person committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her.

She helped all the children, but especially the slow ones, and especially Teddy Stallard. By the end of the year, Teddy had become one of the smartest children in the class and, despite her lie that she would love all the children the same, Teddy became one of her "teacher's pets.."

A year later, she found a note under her door, from Teddy, telling her that she was still the best teacher he ever had in his whole life.

She didn't hear from Teddy for a long time, and then one day seven years later, she received a note.

Dear Miss Thompson, I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class from high school, and you are still the best teacher I ever had. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Four years later, another note came:

Dear Miss Thompson. Things have been tough at times, but I stayed in school, stuck with it and I liked it. They just told me I'll be graduating from college first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. And you are still the best teacher I ever had. Love, Teddy Stollard.

Then four years later, another note came:

Dear Miss Thompson, After I got my bachelor's degree, I decided to go a little further. And you are still the best and favorite teacher I ever had. But now his name was a little longer.... The letter was signed, Theodore F. Stallard, MD.

The story does not end there. There was yet another letter that spring. Teddy said he had met this girl and was going to be married. He was wondering if Miss Thompson might agree to sit at the wedding in the place that was usually reserved for the mother of the groom. He explained that his father had died last year and she was the only family he had now.

Of course, Miss Thompson did. And guess what? She wore that bracelet, the one with several rhinestones missing and she made sure she was wearing the perfume that Teddy remembered his mother wearing on their last Christmas together.

They hugged each other, and Dr. Stallard whispered in Miss Thompson's ear,

"Thank you Miss Thompson for believing in me. Thank you so much for making me feel important and showing me that I could make a difference."

Miss Thompson, with tears in her eyes, whispered back. She said,

"Teddy, you have it all wrong. You were the one who taught me that I could make a difference. I didn't know how to teach until I met you."

You can never tell what type of impact you may have on another's life by your actions ... or lack of action. What do you have to give? Where can you make a difference? Consider this as you venture through life, and just try to make a difference in someone else's life today.

If we truly accept Christ's message to us in today's parable, we'll understand that it's not all about us. It's about the glory of God and his kingdom, and our obligation to grow in his love so we can help bring his kingdom to others — even to those we don't think deserve it. That's what makes it grace. Stop what you are doing! Listen for the cry! See if you don't hear someone out there asking, **"WHAT ABOUT ME?"**

A difference-maker is someone who takes responsibility for something that matters to God. In God's Kingdom, people make a difference in the lives of others for those they do not have to make a difference for. One day, God did that for you. God asks you,

Will you do that for the people I send into your life?

Will you do that?

Let's pray: