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## ***Coming To***

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn on the Third Sunday in Lent  
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32; 2 Corinthians 5:15-21; , March 27, 2022*

In today's gospel reading we have a very familiar story, often called the Prodigal Son. It is the story of a man who had two sons, one of whom goes off to squander the inheritance he prematurely demanded of his father. This son ends up nearly dying of hunger until he wakes up and returns home, hoping to be accepted as a servant so he can eat again. But instead he is welcomed and honored by the overwhelming love of his father whose child had been dead and lost and who has against all odds been found and is alive. Any parent who has ever lost a child will know there is absolutely nothing you would not give to get them back. What interests me today about this story is its pivot point. After the prodigal has spent everything and the famine hits, the story says he was so hungry he would gladly have eaten the corn cobs he was feeding the pigs, but he didn't get even that. And then it says then that he "came to himself." He kind of woke up. In the Greek the meaning is "to come into being, arise, come forth, show oneself, to go public." Maybe you could say it's kind of like coming out, only to yourself.

But what exactly is the coming to, the arising and coming forth, that is happening here?

It seems there have been a few great spiritual teachers in the history of the world who experienced total spiritual enlightenment all at once, but for the prodigal and most of us, it happens slowly and gently, like the light of dawn happens almost imperceptibly, or like spring slowly comes to a land full of winter. For the prodigal, it sounds like an inner shift that he might not fully have been able to put into words. He just realizes that what he is doing is not working at all and that even the so-called “lowest” place in his father’s house, where he belongs, is better than this crazy disconnected place he is in where he is not giving or receiving love with literally anyone, and starving to death. But we can go further. The prodigal thought, in fact he knew, he did not deserve to be accepted unconditionally back into his father’s home after he had abandoned them, hurt and disrespected them. He had done some real damage, for which he did need to make amends.

But that behavior did not define him. Even the worst thing that any of us have ever said, thought, or done does not define us. Who we are at our core is shining with an original goodness, the image of God, that nothing can ever take away, no matter how much we cover it up. This is why a parent can run up to an adult child who is literally stinking and covered in rags and rail thin and embrace them with absolute and unconditional joy.

But because humans do in fact do terrible things, consciously and unconsciously, it is very difficult to remember and wake up, to come to who we really are. If I asked you to think about the things you regret or are ashamed of, if you’ve lived long enough and you’re not in denial, you and I have all done things we *really* wish we could take back. Some of us may even have lived through long periods of numbness and reactive unconscious behavior, for our own reasons, out of our own hurt or resentment, that have created chronic hurt in our families. This happens on the individual level, and it also happens systemically. Minnesota therapist and author Resmaa Menakem talks about the severely

traumatized people from Europe – Irish and Scottish who had been brutalized by the English for centuries, Protestants fleeing religious war on the continent, masses fleeing famine—and some of them out of their trauma created traumatic systems that oppressed indigenous and African American people. This is painful. It's also part of what it is to be human.

But it's only *part* of what it is to be human. The prodigal didn't just wake up to his situation. The language says he "came to *himself*." It's as if what he knew all along finally came to the surface and with a kind of relief he could just say, I know better, and I'm going home. The best he could imagine at that point is at least if he genuinely apologized he could be accepted and not be hungry any more even if he would need to work as a servant and not a son. But the father sees more clearly still. The father remembers the prodigal as a baby, utterly good and pure and innocent. The father can imagine the prodigal healing and shining with his truest, quirky, original self, offering his gifts to the world. His time with the pigs might even end up being a help to others.

This coming to ourselves is about waking up from numbness, waking up out of false ways of living and being and into who we really are at the core and who we were made to be. Jesus was a human being whose inner divinity was so clear, and so aligned and embodied, that some have called him a "True Human." Indeed, he called himself the "Son of Man," the "Son of Humanity," in addition to being called the "Son of God."

The reading from 2 Corinthians today talks about the new life that is possible for us. Here is what it says:

From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new!

But doesn't this make it sound like the new creation we can become is beyond what it means to be human, in fact perhaps even opposed? We no longer know Christ from a *human* point of view? Is he otherworldly and so Godlike as to be really beyond our reach, so that this new creation is kind of a fantasy or just meant for the truly holy few?

The word in Greek for "human" here is the word *sarx*, which means flesh. But it doesn't just mean flesh. It means the surface covering of things, that which gets shed or cast off. It might be like the superficial life the prodigal was living that needed shedding, the surface understanding he had about who he was and what gave him value. As soon as he came to the fullness of who he was, he could let go of it.

Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault, who used to teach often at the beautiful Episcopal House of Prayer in Collegeville, Minnesota and who now works with Richard Rohr, tells this story in a number of her books:

One day, out in the bush, a woman named Isak Denisen came upon a beautiful snake, its skin glistening with subtle, variegated colors. She raved so much about that snakeskin that one of her house servants killed the snake, skinned it, and made it into a belt for her. To her great dismay, that once glistening skin was now just dull and gray. For all along the beauty had lain not in the physical skin but in the quality of its aliveness.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* (Jossey-Bass, 2003) in Chapter Four, "Wisdom and Human Purpose."

Cynthia goes on to describe that quality of aliveness that comes from within, that is more than our physical organs, but is what might be called the ancient breath of life God breathed into the nostrils of the first human. I want to be careful here. It isn't that there is this division between body and spirit. It's that body contains spirit, includes soul, and either one without the other is as empty as the dead skin of a snake shriveled up in the grass. So those who perceive only a reductionist physical universe, or those who think about life only in terms of what is on the surface are missing the essential fact of its inner aliveness and light; so too, the spiritual and abstract is empty unless it is grounded in physical reality. Spirit and body, divine and human, dust and breath go together.

Who we are is like the living snake in the story told by Cynthia Bourgeault, though we may be distracted by the beauty or ugliness of the surface and not see the whole being of ourselves or others. Disconnected from our true core, we can be as brittle and lifeless as the snakeskin abandoned in shreds on the ground. But coming to ourselves, with the help of God, illuminated by the compassion and presence of Christ, we can truly begin to live. We can become what the reading from 2 Corinthians describes when it says that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

What do you need to come to in yourself and in your life?

What do you need to be fully giving and receiving the love of God?

What is needed in this world God so loves, that you have to offer, if only you can bring to the surface who you already are at your core, with God's help?