

Meditation: “Who are you?”

They gathered the most valuable and most cherished of their possessions; as many as they could carry in two hands. They were packing to leave; to leave forever. They were leaving everything they knew; friends, family, the only place they had ever known, the land of their ancestors. They were headed for a far distant land. They were headed for a new beginning. They were headed into a better future than they could have in Kiev.

They arrived in Toronto carrying all of their wealth and worldly treasures in their two hands. No friends or family to turn to. No place to live. No job to go to. Nothing. Only what they carried in their two hands. They had come as refugees, economic refugees, to a land of great promise. When Ukraine had formally separated from the USSR, it was left in political disarray and economic chaos. Toronto was their new home.

The first steps were to find housing and establish a new home. They found an apartment in an area of north Bathurst Street where there were many other Russian speaking people. They quickly made new friends. Those friends showed them where to go to get decent used furniture, and where the food bank was for when they still had month left at the end of the money. They enrolled their children in school and started the search for employment. Moving to a far distant land to make a new life for yourself and your family is a huge risk. There is a lot of work to be done. There is a lot of bureaucracy to work through. In spite of their new found friends, they felt all alone in the world, struggling to survive. Thank God for the food bank and nearly new shop.

And then, one day, they decided it was time to return to their Father's house. Not the home of their ancestors in Kiev, but to the place where they worshipped their heavenly father. The church where the food bank and the nearly new shop operated seemed a godsend to them during the week. They were friendly and helpful and understanding and compassionate. What better place could there be to go and give thanks to God? They showed up, a few at a time. Each Sunday, more of them arrived. They started sharing their God-given gifts in the choir. They were encouraged to join committees that were struggling to find enough people to serve due to advancing years and, until recently, declining numbers. They were welcomed into God's house.

And then, one day, the day of the annual meeting, it happened. They were now chairs of the committees they had joined. They now made up half of the local executive. They dared make known their desires for the congregation as it looked to the future. They wanted to change the way things were done, do things that had never been done

before. And then the old guard reared their heads and dug in their heels and became intransigent. The struggle between the old guard and the newcomers was on. It was a struggle over power and control. It was going to be a struggle to the death, probably the death of the entire congregation.

I wish I could tell you what happened next. I wish I could tell you that everything worked out in the end. I wish I could tell you that the two sides were able to work out their differences. The truth is, I just don't know. I moved on from serving that church during a field education placement to serving on my internship in Kitchener and Roseville.

Have you ever noticed how the title of a story influences what we see in the story? The story of the prodigal son is about the prodigal son, the one who leaves home. We focus on how immoral and unwise and manipulative he is. In the process we really gloss over how belligerent and intransigent the older son is, or the fact that both, in their own way, have a sense of entitlement. We miss entirely any behaviour in the older son that may have contributed to the younger son's initial departure, and possibly to an impending cold war in the home now that he has returned. That cold war will suck the life out of the family if either, a) the younger son doesn't leave again, or b) the two of them don't learn how to work out their differences and learn to live together.

Often when we read this story we ask ourselves, who are we in the story? Are we the younger son who can't wait to get out from under the shadow of his older brother; who told his father that he was dead to him and he wanted his inheritance to do with as he wished; who made a colossal mess of his life and frittered away his inheritance; and who then ran home? And you thought the boomerang generation was a new phenomenon.

Are we the older son, who resents the younger brother being welcomed back home with a large celebration; who is judgmental and hard-hearted, a little mean spirited, perhaps even a little envious of the "fun" his little brother enjoyed, however briefly?

Or perhaps we might fancy ourselves as the generous and forgiving father, who was broken hearted by his son's rejection, yet mourns his loss every day; whose love is so deep and unconditional that he hopes and prays every day that his son will come to his senses and return; whose love is so deep that when he sees the son returning, he forsakes all dignity, hikes up his robe and runs pell mell down the road to embrace his long departed son; whose forgiveness is so absolute that he brushes aside the apology and lavishes upon this long lost lad the best robe and a ring; who celebrates

his return with a feast; and who then leaves the feast to go to his other son who is pouting out in the front yard?

This time, when I read the story, I wondered, as a congregation who are you? Are you the younger brother who think primarily about yourselves, about the programs you want the church to offer for your benefit, or about preserving the clubhouse, and then justifying it by saying that without a clubhouse there will be no club?

Are you the older brother; accepting of the immoral sinner joining us, at least until he makes a suggestion or, even worse, a demand on us. Then you look down your self-righteous, entitled noses at him and stand not only in judgement of him, but stand condemning him. By the way, right or wrong, that is the image that many in the younger generations have of those of us in the church. Unfortunately, all too often they are right. And so, they avoid that struggle to prove themselves. They avoid the judgement. They avoid the condemnation. They avoid the church!

In the end, we all lose, for none of us notice that the father is reaching out to all of us; the newcomer and the old guard alike. We fail to see that the father loves all of us; longs for relationship with all of us; and rejoices over all of us. Perhaps if we called this the story of the prodigal father instead of the story of the prodigal son, we would notice the father's extravagant love. May it be so.