

NEVER FAIL TO ASK WHY YOU ARE WHERE YOU ARE

A man wanted to try hunting somewhere new, and heard that game was readily available in Maine. He drove there and immediately sought out a guide. To his dismay, most of them were very expensive, but he finally found one that was half price.

“But are you as good as the more expensive guides?” the man asked.

“Of course!” the guide replied. “I’m the best guide in the state of Maine.”

Thus assured, the man hired the guide and they began their expedition.

After hunting for three days, however, the man began to become suspicious. They were not finding any game, and he was pretty sure they were going in circles. When he questioned the guide, the guide admitted they were lost.

“Lost?” said the man. “How can that be? You told me you were the best guide in the state of Maine.”

“That’s true,” said the guide. “But right now, I think we’re in Quebec.”

In this age of Google and GPS, it is hard to imagine anyone could get lost. In fact, when we lose our phones, we can use an app on another device to help locate them. Unfortunately, there isn’t an app to help us find ourselves when we get into situations that make us feel lost.

One of the awakenings each one of us needs is the part we play in getting lost in the first place. When we don’t like where we are, we have a great guide – the Holy Spirit – to get us back on track. But to prevent falling back into the same situation, we need to determine that never again will we fail to ask why we are where we are.

Dr. Henry Cloud had a great example of this in his book, *Never Go Back*. He was doing a seminar one day when an audience member asked, “How do you deal with critical people?”

March 31, 2019/4th SUNDAY IN LENT

His response was, “Why would you want to do that? Dealing with critical people is awful.”

The woman was taken aback, but said, “Well ... because you have to.”

“I don’t find that to be true,” Dr. Cloud said. “Why do you *have* to?”

Responding almost in a whisper, the woman said, “Because they’re *everywhere*.”

Dr. Cloud asked the woman to elaborate, and she began to describe judgmental, critical people she knew in work, church, extended family, social circles – pretty much *everywhere*. In a sense, she was right. They were everywhere – at least in *her* everywhere.

As Dr. Cloud helped the woman to realize, wherever she was, she was drawn to the most critical person in the group and become friends with them. Over time, she would feel all they did was criticize her and tell her all that was wrong with the world and her. But the reason she was where she was, was because of her strong tendency to feel badly when someone was critical of her. She was drawn to the critical person in hopes that she could make them like her.¹

As Dr. Cloud notes, until we accept the part we play in where we are in life, the place isn’t likely to change.

Before I go any further, I need to make one huge clarification: I am not saying we always get what we deserve. We may be where we are not because of anything we did or didn’t do, but because someone else made a choice that had a huge negative impact upon our lives.

The entire book of Job is that reminder to us. We see Job lose his livestock, his children and his health, and all the time that he proclaims this isn’t fair and not his fault, we know he is correct. Job Chapter 1 tells us all of Job’s hardship was because the devil made a wager that Job

¹ Dr. Henry Cloud, *Never Go Back: 10 Things You’ll Never Do Again* (Howard Books: New York, NY, 2014), pp. 154-55.

March 31, 2019/4th SUNDAY IN LENT

would renounce God if life wasn't wonderful. God allowed the hardships to occur, but that didn't mean Job deserved them.

So our circumstances aren't always our doing. In 2008, Dr. Cloud lost three loved ones in a few months. Both of his parents died and then a brother-in-law, a Navy SEAL, was killed in Iraq. When an acquaintance learned about the string of deaths, he told Dr. Cloud, "You better figure out how you are attracting so much death into your life and deal with it."²

Ouch. Nothing Dr. Cloud was doing was causing the deaths around him. We all must allow for the fact that at times, every person is a victim – every person has bad circumstances that affect them.

What I am addressing today is the person who gets out of one abusive relationship only to enter another one; the person who enables an addict; a person who complains they are surrounded by negative people; a person with a number of estranged relations in their lives. For these kinds of repeated patterns that we don't like, we need to evaluate why these keep reoccurring. When we recognize the part we have played in these situations, then we can take action to change the pattern.

This is where the parable of the Prodigal Son is invaluable. The younger son was so full of himself, he demands his inheritance – in effect, he's saying he couldn't wait for his father to die. The father graciously gives him his share of the property, after which the young son takes off to a far land to live on his own.

At first, all of the boy's dreams come true. As long as he has money, he has lots of friends. But when the money runs out, so do the friends. Famine hits which means prices of

² Ibid., p. 170.

March 31, 2019/4th SUNDAY IN LENT

groceries go up. The boy has to take the only available job: he takes care of pigs, which is the lowest possible position for a good Jewish boy. He not only feeds the pigs, he is prepared to eat what they are eating because he is so hungry.

The story could have ended with the boy sitting in the middle of the pig pen blaming his father, his brother, his friends, the economy – anything but himself. Instead, the boy has an awakening. Luke 15:17 says, “He came to his senses” or “he came to himself.” What power there is for us in that statement. It affirms that no matter how low we are, we can renounce our mistakes and reclaim our heritage and potential.

In the case of the younger son, he remembers how well he had it back in his father’s home. He doesn’t expect to be reinstated as a son because of what HE did to bring him to this place. Rather, the boy is ready to return home and admit to his father his sin, his unworthiness of being called a son, and to request that he be hired as a servant by his father – a precarious position, for anyone hired could be fired. But he accepts that if he can be hired by his father, he will never again think he is capable of living on his own.

But when the son is far away, the father sees him, and has compassion for him. He runs out to meet him, embraces him – paying no heed to the clothes that smelled like pigs. Before the son can fully apologize, the father calls the servants to bring clothes, sandals, a ring for the boy’s finger, and to start fixing prime rib for dinner. This son that had been dead was alive again; he was lost and had been found – because he had accepted the part he played in getting himself into dire circumstances.

But then, who shows up? The older son comes home, tired and filthy from toiling in the fields, and he hears the sound of the celebration. When he learns his brother has returned

March 31, 2019/4th SUNDAY IN LENT

home, he has a major hissy fit – and the same father who went out to meet his younger son now comes to the older one.

What is the son's complaint? "All these years I have served you, and not once during that time did you give me so much as a baby goat to share with my friends. But now this son of yours" – notice, not my brother, but your son – "comes home after squandering all your money on prostitutes, and you welcome him home with the fatted calf."

Where do you suppose the older brother came up with the notion about prostitutes? That's not what Jesus said earlier in the parable. He said the younger son "squandered" his money. Since he always lived under his father's roof, it's conceivable that the younger son had simply overextended himself –bought lots of groceries to entertain his friends, chose an apartment with too high a rent, or chose a Hummer instead of a fuel-efficient Kia.

Unless the older son tried to track down his brother and found what he said to be true, he may have just repeated the gossip and innuendo assumed by the village. His complaint is that Dad's inheritance has already squandered. The younger son has had fun while he has "obediently" stayed home to do his father's work. The underlying concern is when the father passes, some of what was going to be given to the older brother may go to that brother of his. And that makes him angry enough that he won't go into the house where the feast is taking place.

What the older son is blind to is his part in being where he is. He chose to stay under the same roof as his father. But instead of being in relationship over this time – the thing the father truly wants with each one of us – the son was where he was simply because he believed it would lead to rewards. He could have been celebrating with the father nightly; instead, he has

March 31, 2019/4th SUNDAY IN LENT

been focused on what he will get out of the father in the end. He believes the father owes him for all he has done, instead of recognizing and returning the love the father has for him.

The father assures the son that everything he has belongs to this older son. This is true: all that should go to the younger son had been allocated, so the elder son's inheritance is intact. But even so, the father says, it is proper to celebrate and be rejoice because one who was dead is alive; one who was lost had been found. Because of the father's overwhelming grace, forgiveness is offered to the younger son – and to the older one, too.

We are never told what the response of the older son was –because this story isn't about a father and two sons. This story is about God and each one of us. At one time or another in our lives, all of us have been as lost as one or both of the sons. Some of us willingly turned out backs on God and tried to strike it out on our own. Some of us have been the so-called obedient child who stayed in church and did God's work – but not out of love and compassion, and so there isn't any feeling of closeness to God.

For our lives to change – really change – every one of us must ask ourselves is, “What inside of me needs to change for this to get better?” It doesn't matter whether we were arrogant; it doesn't mean if we were trying to be faithful and slipped. Either way, a God of forgiveness and grace comes to meet us when we “come to ourselves” and accept the part we play in being in the place where each of us is today.

This week, may we ask ourselves why we are where we are, and may we allow a very forgiving father the ability to direct and lead us to where we need to be.