

March 6, 2016 - Lent 4C

“The Low Spark of High-Heeled Boys” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Joshua 5, 2 Cor 5:16-21, Luke 15:11-32

Over the past few weeks, during Lent, we have been examining the transformative journey to the Cross and beyond. Our previous weeks all have one thing in common with each other, they each are highly personal. They all demand looking closely at who we think we are and who we know ourselves to be. On Transfiguration Sunday, we saw that in Christ’s light we see the darkness with ourselves and the evil in the world. In Jesus’ temptation in the desert, we see that light and dark exist together and we must confront the demonic and satanic with confidence in Christ. Then, with Abraham in the desert, we saw that God’s covenant with Abraham, Christ and us is all we have to rely upon since we do not really know ourselves well enough to discern clearly. And last week, we began to see that the defining nature of who we are comes from an eternal worldview.

Each of these have to do with confronting our self-definitions, our ego, our personality. These processes are intensely personal and self-reflective, which is as it should be during the season of Lent. This week, though, in the story of the Prodigal Son and in the Israelites’ entrance into the land, we enter into something new. Both stories leave us right on the edge, on the brink of something new - a ‘new creation’, as Paul says today.

I titled the sermon “The Low Spark of High-heeled Boys” today after a song by Traffic, Steve Winwood and Jim Capaldi’s band. The song was written in 1971 and Jim Capaldi has this to say about it:

Pollard and I would sit around writing lyrics all day, talking about Bob Dylan and the Band, thinking up ridiculous plots for the movie. Before I left Morocco, Pollard wrote in my book 'The Low Spark of High Heeled Boys.' For me, it summed him up. He had this tremendous rebel attitude. He walked around in his cowboy boots, his leather jacket. At the time he was a heavy little dude. It seemed to sum up all the people of that generation who were just rebels. The 'Low Spark,' for me, was the spirit, high-spirited. You know, standing on a street corner. The low rider. The 'Low Spark' meaning that strong undercurrent at the street level.¹

This is a perfect description, it seems to me, of the Prodigal Son. When I was 18, I could not wait to leave my hometown and my parents’ house. I was chomping at the bit, as they say. What I did not do is what our son in the story does today - ask for my inheritance and then blow it all on hookers and drugs and fast cars and nightclubbing. But I am sure some of this in this room can identify with the ‘rebel’ attitude, rebellion simply for the sake of rebellion. Dressing the part, hearing the heels of your expensive shoes clicking on the sidewalk outside the club, as the valet drives away and the sparks fly off the bottom of your low-riding sports car as it goes over the speed bump, and you walk up to the bouncer and he lifts the cable to let you in the club, in front of the line. This is the sound of the low spark of high-heeled boys. I know I can imagine it.

¹ from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Low_Spark_of_High_Heeled_Boys_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Low_Spark_of_High_Heeled_Boys_(song)), accessed 3/4/16

It is a way of thinking of one's self, a way of being. That way of being doesn't have to be so extreme as our Prodigal son today. Whatever it is that has defined you, made you who you are - this is the person we are talking about today. Maintaining and controlling the persona of this person is a lot of work and it requires a lot of effort.

What breaks it down, what deconstructs the persona we have built for ourselves so something more meaningful can get in through the cracks and tears in the fabric, what decomposes the self-created self so God might work with us instead?

We aren't given any time-frames in our parable today, but we can imagine years have passed before the son "comes to himself", as Scripture puts it. The son realizes, in the words of the Traffic song, "The percentage you're paying is too high-priced and you're living beyond all your means". Of course, he realizes this when he has been reduced to feeding slop to pigs. The son realizes, perhaps, that he is now one of the servants he looked down upon when he was the son of a wealthy man. Now, after he has fermented in the soup and slop of work, self-reflection and seeing life from the bottom up, the son knows the truth of who he really is - a servant of the Father.

Jesus is showing us in this parable that God will do whatever is needed to remind us of who we are. Between the fermentation and rumination of our past - all those things we have done and those things we have left undone - and the unveiled, uncovered, unmasked person of the present, the Father reminds us who we truly are. "You are my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well-pleased."

The son has rehearsed his speech for his father. He has made decisions about who he will be in the face of his father. All this is based on how the son has spent his inheritance, whom he has become based on his past. But the Father doesn't even allow the son to complete his eloquent speech. He simply welcomes him back as if he had never left.

I learned a new word as I prepared for today - it is *eisodos*. *Eisodos* is the opposite of *exodus*. An *exodus* is a leaving, a going out. The Israelites left Egypt, led by Moses, who was led by God - thus the Exodus. The son leaves his father's house. And *eisodos* is a coming home, a returning, a going in. In the going out, the Exodus, the Israelites wander the desert for 40 years. In the same way the son comes to himself during his time away in our parable today, the Israelites come into themselves in the desert. Think of the 40 years in the desert as a time of purging, a time of peeling away all the layers of a slave mentality so that the people could begin to learn what it means to live as the free people of God. Though it is not phrased this way, the Prodigal Son learns what it means to be a son of the Father in his time away.

But here is the thing: we do not know, once we have boiled away all the personas and behaviors that keep us from God, once we have unlearned all the ways of being a slave to the empire and Pharaoh, we do not know what the new land will look like, we do not know how we will be received by those who once loved us. We do not know how we will come into our destiny as God's free and loved people. One writer says it this way:

Here we undergo a type of rebirth resulting from the deep willingness to let go of all the elements of (ourselves) that no longer serve our spiritual evolution. This marks the true

*beginning of inner initiation, of entry into a 'higher' life in which our best destiny has a chance to unfold.*²

The Israelites mark this transition into the greater and higher destiny of God's people with the ritual of circumcision, since they have not accepted that bodily expression of God's covenant, and with the celebration of the Passover upon their entrance into the land flowing with milk and honey. The father marks this return with a feast. We stand at the threshold of a new life, a new creation within which changes the way we see the world without.

The last verse of "The Low Spark of High-Heeled Boys" (it is an 11 minute song - 18 in the live version) says,

*If I gave you everything that I owned and asked for nothing in return
Would you do the same for me as I would for you
Or take me for a ride, and strip me of everything including my pride?
But spirit is something that no one destroys
And the sound that I'm hearing is only the sound
The low spark of high-heeled boys*

We all have a past. Some of us have a past like the Prodigal Son. Some of us have wandered for a long time in a desert. Some of us have attempted to follow all the rules and make all the best decisions. Some of us in that past may have become gun-shy in the present day, assuming everyone is going to take you for a ride and strip you of everything including your pride.

But God's Spirit is finally our guide. God's spirit cannot be destroyed. God's spirit only transforms, transfigures, transmutes people, behaviors, and pasts into present possibilities. We need only come to ourselves and come home. We all have a past but we are no longer defined by it. *And the sound that I am hearing is only the sound of the low spark of high-heeled boys.* We hear the memories, voices and urgings of the past, but we are not that past. There are people, like the other son in our parable, who want to hold you to all the high-priced living from that past. What is more, if we identify with the new people in a new land or the son who has returned to his father's home, we do not know anything about our future. We stand faced with new possibilities beyond our past, new ways of being beyond the definitions we placed upon ourselves before this moment.

Paul says, *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...* (2 Corinthians 5:17-19)

So this week, God calls us to stand as God's free people in a new, unknown land together, worshiping and thanking Him for all he has given us. God calls us to hear the sounds of our past but to instead be defined by His love for each of us. And God wants to welcome all of us home, regardless of how we have spent the inheritance of the Holy Spirit up to this point. You are a new creation, a welcomed son and daughter into the Father's great banquet. Take your place at the table and share in God's providence, promise and protection for you. Amen.

² PT Mistiberger, <http://www.ptmistlberger.com/psychospiritual-alchemy.php>, accessed 3/4/16.