This summer, several youth and young adults, mostly young men in the congregation have sought me out in ways I have not experienced before, at least, not to this extent. They ask me questions about God’s love. They ask me questions about God’s plan for their lives. Some of them are lost, and something put it in their heads—could it be God?—that the church can offer direction and hope. I am spending my time listening to them, hearing what it is like to be them, and listening where God might be working in their lives while I humbly pray that I might be an agent of Jesus’ love for them.

And so this week when I reread James Weldon Johnson’s poem “Prodigal Son” from God's Trombones, the faces of some of these people have entered into my head. I imagine as you read this poem it will resound with you too. Maybe you will see a young person you love or try to love in this poem. Maybe you will recall that time when you were lost, and then found. Maybe you will find yourself in this poem right now, as the one who is currently seeking and trying everything that might please and soothe but only leaves you coming up empty. May this poem offer you the hope that I believe our faith can bring, when we trust that God’s arms are indeed welcoming and open.

The Prodigal Son

by James Weldon Johnson (African American Poet, 1871-1938)

Young man—
Young man—
Your arm’s too short to box with God.

But Jesus spake in a parable, and he said:
A certain man had two sons.
Jesus didn’t give this man a name,
But his name is God Almighty.
And Jesus didn’t call these sons by name,
But ev’ry young man,
Ev’rywhere,
Is one of these two sons.

And the younger son said to his father,
He said: Father, divide up the property,
And give me my portion now.

And the father with tears in his eyes said: Son,
Don’t leave your father’s house.
But the boy was stubborn in his head,
And haughty in his heart,
And he took his share of his father’s goods,
And went into a far-off country.

There comes a time,
There comes a time
When ev’ry young man looks out from his father’s house,
Longing for that far-off country.
And the young man journeyed on his way,
And he said to himself as he travelled along:
This sure is an easy road,
Nothing like the rough furrows behind my father's plow.

Young man—
Young man—
Smooth and easy is the road
That leads to hell and destruction.
Down grade all the way,
The further you travel, the faster you go.
No need to trudge and sweat and toil,
Just slip and slide and slip and slide
Till you bang up against hell’s iron gate.

And the younger son kept travelling along,
Till at night-time he came to a city.
And the city was bright in the night-time like day,
The streets all crowded with people,
Brass bands and string bands a-playing,
And ev’rywhere the young man turned
There was singing and laughing and dancing.
And he stopped a passer-by and he said:
Tell me what city is this?
And the passer-by laughed and said: Don’t you know?
This is Babylon, Babylon,
That great city of Babylon.
Come on, my friend, and go along with me.
And the young man joined the crowd.

Young man—
Young man—
You’re never lonesome in Babylon.
You can always join a crowd in Babylon.
Young man—
Young man—
You can never be alone in Babylon,
Alone with your Jesus in Babylon.
You can never find a place, a lonesome place,
A lonesome place to go down on your knees,
And talk with your God, in Babylon.
You’re always in a crowd in Babylon.
And the young man went with his new-found friend,
And bought himself some brand new clothes,
And he spent his days in the drinking dens,
Swallowing the fires of hell.
And he spent his nights in the gambling dens,
Throwing dice with the devil for his soul.  
And he met up with the women of Babylon.  
Oh, the women of Babylon!  
Dressed in yellow and purple and scarlet,  
Loaded with rings and earrings and bracelets,  
Their lips like a honeycomb dripping with honey,  
Perfumed and sweet-smelling like a jasmine flower;  
And the jasmine smell of the Babylon women  
Got in his nostrils and went to his head,  
And he wasted his substance in riotous living,  
In the evening, in the black and dark of night,  
With the sweet-sinning women of Babylon.  
And they stripped him of his money,  
And they stripped him of his clothes,  
And they left him broke and ragged  
In the streets of Babylon.

Then the young man joined another crowd—  
The beggars and lepers of Babylon.  
And he went to feeding swine,  
And he was hungrier than the hogs;  
He got down on his belly in the mire and mud  
And ate the husks with the hogs.  
And not a hog was too low to turn up his nose  
At the man in the mire of Babylon.

Then the young man came to himself—  
He came to himself and said:  
In my father’s house are many mansions,  
Ev’ry servant in his house has bread to eat,  
Ev’ry servant in his house has a place to sleep;  
I will arise and go to my father.  
And his father saw him afar off,  
And he ran up the road to meet him.  
He put clean clothes upon his back,  
And a golden chain around his neck,  
He made a feast and killed the fatted calf,  
And invited the neighbors in.

Oh-o-oh, sinner,  
When you’re mingling with the crowd in Babylon—  
Drinking the wine of Babylon—  
Running with the women of Babylon—  
You forget about God, and you laugh at Death.  
Today you’ve got the strength of a bull in your neck  
And the strength of a bear in your arms,  
But some o’ these days, some o’ these days,
You'll have a hand-to-hand struggle with bony Death,
And Death is bound to win.

Young man, come away from Babylon,
That hell-border city of Babylon.
Leave the dancing and gambling of Babylon,
The wine and whiskey of Babylon,
The hot-mouthed women of Babylon;
Fall down on your knees,
And say in your heart:
I will arise and go to my Father

Leah Fowler