

Pastor's Sermon

March 30, 2025 Lent 4

Prodigal Grace

Our Gospel this morning is one of Jesus' best loved parables, maybe his most famous. It's probably neck and neck with the story of the Good Samaritan. It is so well known it can be a problem. You hear the opening words, recognize the story, and then tune out, because you've heard it before.

We call this parable the Prodigal Son, but Jesus never gave titles to any of his parables. I have come to think that by this title our focus centers our thoughts upon the younger son exclusively. But when we do that, miss much of the power in this story. Over fifty years preaching, this is at least the seventeenth time I have had to study it. Each time I try to find something new.

First is the title. Does anyone here know what word the "prodigal" actually means? I didn't think so. The only time we hear that word is for this parable. The dictionary defines it as recklessly extravagant, wasteful. I have come to think that the son isn't the only prodigal in the parable. All three characters in the story seem to be recklessly wasteful in one way or another. The wayward son is not alone.

Of course, the infamous younger son is prodigal. He comes to his father and dares to demand his share of the family inheritance. He doesn't just ask, he demands it, "Give me my share." My father would have said, "Over my dead body!" The problem here is that the father is not dead! But to make such a demand implies that for this son, the father is as good as dead. According to the law of Moses, he is entitled to 1/3 of all his father's wealth. The older son would get a 2/3rd share, a double share of the property. So the father "divided his property between them." That fact is often overlooked; the father gives both sons their share. He relinquishes his rights to everything he has accumulated over the years. The sons now own it all.

The younger son takes all of his share and moves to a distant country, a Gentile country. He then proceeds to blow it all in dissolute living. There's another unfamiliar word --dissolute. Anyone know what that one means? If

you do I'll hear your confessions after worship. Dissolute means a complete lack of moral restraint, debauchery. Left with nothing, he is so wasted that he takes a job as a hired hand slopping the hogs, a job no good Jewish boy would do. He would be considered unclean. He gets so hungry that he would gladly eat the pods the pigs were eating. That food is not exactly four star restaurant cuisine. Have you ever seen what pigs eat? Most of us would consider it garbage. He finally comes to his senses and decides he'd be better off eating crow and return home to take a job as a slave. On the way home he practices what he's going to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." I've been there. The one time (sic) that I missed behaved and was sent to my room until my father came home, I rehearsed over and over what I would say that might appease him.

This is where Jesus introduces Prodigal #2, the father. He has already been recklessly wasteful by giving everything away to his sons. Now his life consists of sitting on the porch thinking about what might have been, where did he go wrong. Gazing at the horizon, he sees his wayward son coming down the road and runs out to welcome him. There was no "Well look who decided to finally come home." There was no judgment, no sarcasm, only compassion. He doesn't even wait to hear his son's well rehearsed speech. He just throws his arms around him and welcomes him home. He is recklessly wasteful with his love for his son. He even goes further. Turning to his slaves, he tells them to bring the best robe for him, puts a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet and orders the slave to kill the fatted calf. That calf would provide enough meat for a hundred people. "Let's have a party! That son of mine who was dead, is alive again!" Another problem. None of that stuff is his to give. He had given the remainder of his property, that 2/3rd share to the older son who now owns it all.

Now we meet Prodigal #3. The elder brother is out working in the fields when he hears music and dancing. He wonders why. As the owner of all this, why wasn't he informed about a party! Apparently, no one told him what was going on. He hadn't granted permission for a party, there's work to be done. Even his slaves knew what was going on, but he doesn't. When he does find out the party is for his wayward brother's return home, he is fit to be tied. His

father is throwing a party for that brother at his expense. There will be hell to pay. He is “angry and refuses to go in.” The father reaches out to him, another recklessly wasteful action. The father is rebuffed by the elder brother. “I’ve worked all these years, never once disobeyed you, (he just did) and you have never given me anything. Except for a 2/3rd share of everything.” He continues, “That son of yours (not my brother) shows up and you throw him a party. It’s just not fair, especially after he devoured your property with prostitutes. How would he have known that? In his rage, he can’t understand. He finds no joy with any of this. He has /worked like slave for what? He is recklessly wasteful with his life. He has no room for love, compassion, or joy. Vengeance in the name of fairness is all he has on his mind.

The story ends right there. The younger brother is inside enjoying the party. The father and elder brother are standing in the field. I wonder what might have happened next. I’ll leave that to your imagination.

Jesus’ parable is really about the prodigal love of God. God is recklessly wasteful on the likes of us. God has love enough to waste on all of the lost, the broken, the sinners, and the holier than thou righteous. Not one of us can claim to be perfect. Not one of us is worthy of such love, but that’s what grace is all about. Jesus is telling this parable to the Pharisees and scribes who were complaining about the company he keeps. He eats with tax collectors and sinners. What’s worse, he welcomes them in spite of their dissolute living. The Pharisees were so heavenly minded that they were no earthly good. Their rules and interpretations of Moses’ laws prevented them from experiencing the joy of the Kingdom of God. They saw no room for reconciliation, no room for compassion, no room for joy in celebrating that the lost might be actually be found.

This year I did notice one new thing in the parable. Neither son ever says thank you. There was no expression of gratitude for what was given to each. There was no thanks for the welcome home. There was no thanks for the father’s love. But the father still reaches out to each of them, calling them to new blessings. So it is with God. God doesn’t wait for your thank you. God’s love comes to each us right where we are. God invites us to share in the joy of the Kingdom. We are forgiven, renewed, and loved just as we are, in spite of

what we have done. In the second reading, Paul writes to the Corinthian church and reminds them, "All of this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ." God's love makes us new into a new creation, taking away the old and making us new. God isn't busy counting our trespasses, our recklessly wasteful lives. Instead, God entrusts us with his grace, calling us to a new vision. We are called to view the world through the eyes of Christ, not in a human view. No one said this would be easy. Rejoicing in the love that makes us new, sharing with the other losts around us, we celebrate we, too, have been found by Christ. Now we are ambassadors for Christ, sent to share the good news of God's love for all. Amen.