

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 ~ Luke 15:1-3a, 11-32

Full to the Brim: Prodigal Grace

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent ~ March 27, 2022

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### *Introduction*

You have probably heard this story before. Perhaps *many, many* times. It's best known by the title, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." And, of course you just heard Carmen read a children's storybook form of it, a moment ago. I invite you now as we prepare to hear the full parable from Luke 15, to play a little game with me. Consider what *other title* you might give to it. Although it is best known as the "The Prodigal Son" there are three main characters in this story, the man and his two sons, *all* of whom could be described as "prodigal." I will remind you that "prodigal" is an adjective that describes someone who spends money or resources freely and recklessly. Someone who is wastefully extravagant, is "prodigal."

As you consider alternative titles to this story, see if you can see how all three, the man and his two sons are wastefully extravagant of their most precious resources, from a human point of view. Keep in mind that Jesus spins out this parable in direct response to very human church leader types grumbling about the company that Jesus chooses to keep. The so-called "outsiders." The "unclean," the "sinners," in their eyes. Yes, Jesus does choose to eat and hang out with those folks. And so he makes us these stories to teach them why.

But Jesus *also* keeps regular company, eats regularly, hangs out with the so called "insiders," the righteous leaders of his tradition, too. So here they are together again, and Jesus, already well on his way to Jerusalem by now, seizes this opportunity for a teaching moment. Our story, the parable of the Prodigal Son, is actually the third of three parables Jesus told all at once. Three parables sharing the same theme: stories of a shepherd, a woman, and a father searching relentlessly for a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. Until they are found. But the lost son story is a little different. It causes us to ask as many questions as it answers beginning with this: Is the younger son the *only* lost person in this story? Remember this is a parable, like all of Jesus' parables, it is a story that teaches multiple lessons. And resists closure.

How might God feed your spirit with this story today? What title might you give it? Open your eyes and your heart to see and hear perhaps the greatest story Jesus ever told—one that is old as Adam and Eve in the garden and as real and raw as the resentment that may be gripping your gut as you try to worship right now.

### *Sermon*

What *else* might we call this parable? How about: *The Most Dysfunctional Family*? Jesus opens the story with an absolutely outrageous request of the younger son, "Father, give me my share of the property that will belong to me." Basically, the younger son is telling his father, "I wish you were dead." And then, the father complies? How is that good parenting? To say nothing of the economic threat to the entire family that a disbursal of that magnitude would impose. And skipping to the end of the story, why didn't anyone in the family go tell the elder son about his brother returning and invite him to the party? Or here's another one, *Salvation by*

*Starvation.* Was the thing that turned him homeward really a change of heart, or was it his empty belly? The reasoning we are given for his decision to return had mostly to do with getting three square meals again, if you think about it. I'm sure some of you are thinking of one along the lines of, *It's Not Fair: The Youngest Gets his Way again!* And you have to wonder, *Where's the Mom?* Okay, just one more: *What are You Doing Dad?* Cue the eye rollage. From giving the son what he asked for, to running to meet him (something respected men did not do in that culture because it opened their robes and exposed their bodies in embarrassing ways), to leaving the party he was hosting to talk to his elder son (another absolute "no no" in the culture of Jesus' time). This dad's behavior was downright embarrassing.

Whether you came up with any of these titles or another (which I would love to hear!): your title will have something to do with what struck you in the story *this* time. Every time we come to this story, we may relate to a different character in this story: The resentful, angry elder brother, the lost, scared, humiliated younger brother, the rejected, insulted, waiting father, the bystander slave, the absent mother, the grumbling church leaders. I believe those feelings and roles are ones we all experience at one time or another.

Henri J. M. Nouwen calls it, "A Story of Homecoming" in his book he wrote in response to what began as a chance encounter he had with a reproduction of Rembrandt's, painting titled, "The Return of the Prodigal Son."<sup>i</sup> Nouwen was so moved to the core of his being by that painting, that he decided to go to St. Petersburg, Russia to experience the original portrait. The children have distributed a copy of the painting in your bulletin, which I invite you to find and look at for a moment. It is actually a huge work, oil on canvas: eight feet high by six feet wide. Rembrandt was close to his death when he painted his Prodigal Son. When you look at the portrait, what do you see? At first our eyes are attracted to the light-enveloped embrace of father and son, surrounded by four other figures. Let's start with the younger son and the father.

### **YOUNGER SON:**

Look at his posture of kneeling, begging. Notice the soles of his feet, tell the story of a long, humiliating journey scarred: picture of humiliation and defeat. One sandal completely off. The other worn to shreds. Maybe reflecting the state of his spirit, as well. Our biblical echo chamber brings to mind Jesus' washing the disciples' feet, and way back in Exodus, we see Moses at the burning bush taking off his feet because he is on sacred ground. Surely this moment is sacred ground. His clothes are only under garments—he no longer has a cloak. His head—shaven, like a prisoner, or ill-treated hostage. But also, look carefully. It almost looks like the head of a baby who just came out of his mother's womb—head still wet, face is still fetus-like—a return to the womb of God? That reminds us of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, and the need to be reborn from above, spiritually. Can you find the one remaining sign of dignity on him? Especially all you Wisconsin hunters can relate to this: he kept his weapon. He still has his sword. One shred of identity as the son of his father.

### **FATHER:**

His posture is one of embrace. He robe is a great red cloak, arch shape, a welcome place, where it is good to be...home. What else does it remind you of? Yes, wings. The sheltering wings of a

mother bird (hen, eagle). Take a moment to notice the father's hands: the left hand is strong and muscular, fingers spread out, some pressure in the thumb, firm grip, it looks like traditionally male hand. But now look at the right hand: It doesn't hold, or grasp, rather it is soft, tender, caress, stroke—it is a mother's hand. Rembrandt has painted this father as not simply a patriarch—but a mother as well as father, a non-binary parent figure. In so far as the father can represent God, we see before us in these two hands of embrace, a depiction of God as "genderful." Beyond one gender or the other.

### **ELDER SON:**

First, before we look at the posture, notice that he is barely in the picture, there is a chasm of open space separating him from his father, there is even a gap in the floor. Notice how in broad outlines he is Painted to look like his father: both bearded, both wear large red cloaks, much in common—even the light on his face/luminous face of his father. And at the same time, we see Painful differences. Beginning with the posture: in contrast to his father's embrace, the elder son is stiffly erect, holding long staff, but his hands are clasped together, tightly. He is trying to look the part of his father, and yet he is clearly at this point in the story, staying outside the circle of love, refusing to enter. His posture exudes seething resentment. The silent killer: cold anger that he rooted itself in the core of our being.

As Jesus ends the parable with this open question, we can see it in this painting: the elder son can still choose for or against the love that is offered to him. He too needs to come home. He needs the embrace of a forgiving father—perhaps the hardest conversion *is the conversion of the one who stayed home.*

### **BYSTANDERS:**

How many do you see? There are actually three. Critical eyes, uncommitted onlookers. The one seated looks to be pounding his chest. Maybe a tax collector or sinner? The two others one is barely more than a face: he, she, they? The other easy to miss. Are they looking at the son on his knees too, or are they looking at you?

This portrait invites us to **see**, thanks to the brilliant imagination of a seventeenth century painter, what God's prodigal love looks like in abundant reds, browns and yellows, in shadowy recesses and a bright foreground. I believe this portrait invites us to see a place, to glimpse a world beyond earning, deserving, and rewarding. And yes, a world beyond the binary. This story pulls back the curtain on God's vision of a world where people are not sorted as "insider/outsider" or, "clean/unclean" or "saint/sinner." Every person is made in God's image, just as they are. We are "both/and." All of us. And that changes everything in how we look at others and at ourselves. That's what Paul was trying to teach his petulant, feisty, congregation in Corinth, in our first scripture lesson from 2 Corinthians. We have all been reconciled by God, and that is our work: to reconcile, bring home, see every person as a sibling, not as "that son of yours" but, in the words of the father, "this brother of yours" who was dead and has come to life. He was lost and has been found. That's why we had to celebrate. We had to.

Can we trust, can we give ourselves to a love like that? We think, we live in a finite, binary world. And how well we know, "The world's love is and always will be conditional."<sup>iii</sup> And our minds, absent from God's world, want a world that is fair. That is not the story of this parable. The love in this story is unconditional and it is not fair. Nor does this parable provide a happy ending. It ends by pulling us in, up close and personal: face-to-face with our hardest spiritual choice: to trust or not to trust in God's extravagant, not-fair, all-forgiving love.

As a child I had kind of a love/hate relationship with the game of "Hide and Seek." It was so exciting to find a good hiding place and start to think that I might win! I heard the other players being so easily found--but not me. I had really outsmarted them this time. Just wait. Try not to make any sounds... Wait, what happened? Maybe they got bored with the game. How could they have forgotten about me? I was still waiting to be found. But no one was looking anymore. They were on to the next game. And ready to ditch the baby sister.

Friends, God will never never stop looking. Jesus gave us not one, but three parables in rapid fire, three ways of teaching us about God's relentless search. These stories are not teaching us that much about repentance. The lost sheep and the lost coin do not repent. Even the lost son's motives are not clearly centered on repentance if you look carefully at the story. He got hungry and scared. He wanted to survive and knew his best shot would be to go home. That is the motive in the text itself. These three stories are mainly about God's relentless search, and God's unmitigated delight in finding, in restoring, in bringing back together, yes, reconciling—anything and everyone. Large and small, likable and despicable.

Whose actions you detest? Whose decisions you deplore? Why should *that* person be given the best robe, a ring, sandals, and a fancy party? No way. Never. Well, of course not from a "human point of view." But then along comes Christ who uses a different calculus. And calls us to do the same. We heard it in Paul's letter to the judgy, grumblers in the Corinth church: "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." Did you catch that? We follow a God who counts every hair on our head, but does not count our trespasses against us. No, that isn't fair. But that is God.

That's why the song we sing so often at funerals, the hymn that is among the most beloved of the last two centuries, isn't "Amazing Fairness, How Sweet the Sound." Nor is it "Amazing Meritocracy, How Sweet the Sound." It's "Amazing **Grace**, How Sweet the Sound." Are you in need of God's amazing grace today? Or maybe you have a person God is waiting for you to stop resenting. God is seeking, ready or not. Will we come? Will we come home?

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<sup>i</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, (Image Books Doubleday: New York, NY, 1994). The observations regarding this painting were gleaned from this extraordinary book.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, p.42.