

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
St. Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Prodigal: adjective; recklessly extravagant, characterized by wasteful expenditure, lavish.

This is perhaps one of the best known parables of Jesus, if not the best known. It has become known as *The Prodigal Son*, but that title doesn't fit quite right. The parable is not simply about the son, though the story mainly follows his actions. It does so to set up who the parable is about—the father who is prodigal in his own right.

There was a father who had two sons. Now, when it comes to inheritance, parents these days tend to stipulate that their assets and belongings are divided equally among all of their children; however, in that time, the law stated that inheritances fell to the eldest son. He could do whatever he wanted with it, but it was almost expected that he would use the inheritance to support the family—his mother and any unwed sisters (that's how it went for daughters—they were married off, becoming the responsibility of their husbands). In any case, everything that the father owned was passed down to his oldest son when he died—land, property, and money—all of it.

Younger sons might have gotten a little bit of cash and help starting a family. And this usually happened while the father was still living. Eldest sons were expected to take over for their fathers, living in the same house, working the same land or vocation, using all of the same tools, etc., which is why they got all the inheritance. Younger sons were expected to start off on their own.

So, it's amazing that the younger son went to his father and demanded his share of the inheritance. For one thing, as was just mentioned, younger sons didn't get much of anything—a little help to get out of the house, if anything. He could hope that his older brother would use the inheritance to help him out, but, honestly, he shouldn't expect much from either his father or his brother. For another thing, demanding an inheritance of one's father is akin to telling him to die; it's like telling him that he's not needed any more, and the only thing he's important for is what he owns—that is, what he would hand down.

Even more amazingly, the father complied! He died, right there on the spot...at least, to the type of life he was living. Mark this well: both sons got their inheritance at that moment. Even though their father was still living, "[H]e divided his property between them," Jesus said. The older son gets the land and property—everything that the father owns is his. The younger son gets some cash—everything that the father wanted to give him—and this son recklessly strikes out on his own.

It only seems appropriate behavior—appropriate in the sense that that's how younger sons generally tend to act. First-born sons tend to be the responsible type—they adhere to rules, make honor rolls, become leaders and CEOs—generally speaking. Younger sons tend to be more reckless—they push the envelope, are C and B students, get into trouble easier (but can easily talk their way out of it), and tend to be more popular—generally speaking. It makes sense, in a way; if the number one son is going to be all of those things, why should number two (and on down the line) be the same—why should they compete?

So, the younger son took the money and ran. He saw the world, so to speak, lived lavishly, spent extravagantly—his little bit of money must have been a lot! Jesus didn't give specifics; that's not important. All He says is that the son scattered his wealth wastefully. Your minds fill in the gaps—wine and women, late nights and lavish parties, playing slots and casting lots. It almost makes him sound prodigal, doesn't it. And he spent it all; it didn't take but half a verse for his part of the inheritance to be gone.

And, wouldn't you know it: after it was spent, a severe famine gripped the country. The son quickly found himself not only lacking, but needing. Work was scarce, but he found a job—a job which would have made Jesus' hearers cringe—feeding pigs. He even got to the point where the food he was feeding the pigs looked desirable and appetizing—you might imagine Jesus' hearers making gagging sounds and dry heaving.

"This is ridiculous," the young son thought. "Here I am feeding pigs, longing for the food they eat, and my father's hired hands have it better than this. I can't go back as his son, though, but if I could be hired on as one of his workers... I know, I'll go back and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" He left the pig farm and the foreign country and returned home.

Before he could get home, though, his father saw him coming, still a far distance off. You might imagine that the father would sit on the porch and gaze of into the distance hopefully and expectantly every day. After all, he had nothing else to do, the farm was his eldest son's now. So, in what was also amazing to Jesus' hearers, the father got up and ran to his younger son, embraced him and planted a big kiss on the young man's cheek. It was amazing, for one thing, because old men didn't run—they had lived long lives, it was now time to let stuff come to them. But not this father; compassion compelled him to go to what he wants—to run to it.

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." The son could go no further; the father's response wouldn't allow it. The son didn't need to go any further; he had made a contrite confession.

Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.

In an act befitting forgiveness, the father restored the son to the family, clothing him and having a signet ring placed back on his hand, and celebrating the return of the lost son with a feast. The father called for this before the son could complete his line. No, he couldn't become a hired hand because he is a son—a son to a most prodigal father—and always has been!

You are like that lost son...how? God lavishes so much on you. Daily, you pray the Fourth Petition, but how often do you mean it? I mean, God certainly gives daily bread—everything that belongs to the support and wants of the body (and you can list them all if you want)—and He does so even without your prayer...to everyone. But when you pray it, are you sincerely asking Him to lead you to know this; are you sincerely thanking Him for your daily bread? And what do you do with everything that belongs to the support and wants of the body? You extravagantly spend it, like the young son did his portion of the inheritance. You scatter your wealth wastefully—fill in the gaps all you want—to one extent or another. You so often use these temporal blessings from God without a second thought as to where they came from and why they are given. God gives much and you waste much.

It can easily get to the point (and so often does) that one wishes God dead. Oh, not directly. No, you won't go to the Father and demand your inheritance, but by your actions, you proclaim that what you have is a result of your effort, your labor, your doing. It is as if you are saying, "I have gained what I have by my deeds; God is not in the picture." In reality, it's nothing more than feeding pigs and calling what they get desirable.

So, in His wisdom God allows famines and financial recessions. He allows these things to teach a lesson. Oh, it is by no means vengeful or spiteful. He's not saying, "Now, let's see you make it in difficult times. See what you get without a job, without money. See how far you can get without food." No, He allows these things to happen so that you are led to recognize that what you had and all that

you still have is a gift from Him. He allows these things to happen so that you can have our “Aha!” moment as the young son did in the parable.

In fact, that’s why God allows and sometimes even sends all kinds of suffering and every kind of loss. Sin drives you away from Him, so God allows suffering, and suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. (cf. Romans 5:3-4) By way of God-given faith, then, you come to your senses.

And, like the young son, you are led to return to your Father: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son...” And, like the young son, you can get no farther than the confession. Like the father in the parable, the Heavenly Father is quick to forgive, eager to do so, running to you before you can get to Him (because you can’t); He throws His arms around you, clothes you in the robes of His only-begotten Son’s righteousness, and reminds you of the sign of the cross placed upon head and heart, marking you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. Then, as if to top it all off, your return from sin is marked by a feast. For now, a foretaste of that feast, as you receive the forgiveness of your sin in a most tangible way, eating and drinking Christ’s body and blood given and shed for you on the tree of the cross. No, you can’t get to the part about becoming a hired servant, there’s no way you would be a hired servant, because you are sons of a most prodigal Father who always lavishes His grace on you—and you always have been!

This is what happens every week in this place...sometimes twice a week: coming to your senses, making a confession, receiving absolution, having a foretaste of the feast to come.

Now, it would be easy to end this sermon there. After all, you’ve heard and experienced the Law. And that Law has been countered by the Gospel of God’s grace. But, the parable had two sons; so, I must continue.

The older son was working in his field. He had been all day. At the end of the day, he returned to the house, but as he got near it, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He asked one of the servants what was going on. “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.”

This angered the older son. He didn’t want to be a part of this party. How could that good-for-nothing brother of his deserve such a party?

Notice again, though, that the father went to the son. And, going out to him, the father pleaded with him. The son replied, “Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!” Talk about filling in the gaps... But his father answered him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”

Now, it is well to note that Jesus told this parable, the third in Luke 15, to the Pharisees. They had complained that Jesus received and ate with sinners and tax collectors, people much like the younger son in today’s parable. Because of this, the Pharisees are easily recognizable in the older son. His response could easily be tweaked to be something they would say: “God, we have served you all our lives. We keep your Laws; we do all that you require of us. Why do you not show us more respect and love than those who transgress your Laws and constantly break your commandments? Why do you celebrate more over them who disobey you than us who work our hardest to obey you?”

You are so much like that lost son, too. I mean, I’m sure you can, to some extent, agree with these sayings: you come to church every Sunday, at least the Sundays that you can; you read your Bibles all the time; you pray everyday; you especially pray the Lord’s Prayer everyday, since He told you to pray

it. You should get some sort of preferential treatment over the “C’n’E” Christians (those who only come to church on Christmas and Easter). Why should you rejoice that they made it to church that one time in a blue moon when you’ve been coming more often? You have been here longer!

So, listen once again to the father’s response, for it is also the Father’s response: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” Or, to you He could say, “Son, you have always been with me. I have given all for you. I have also given all for your lost and found brother. Therefore, it is right that we should rejoice over this one who was dead to us, but is alive again in your Lord, Jesus Christ. He was lost, as you were, but is found, as you are.”

The parable ends with the father’s words to the older son. Did he join the party for his younger brother? Did he ever recognize that he was lost as his younger brother was? Did he ever accept and rejoice over his lost and found brother, and receive his father who is a prodigal, gracious father? Jesus never said. It’s an open-ended parable. Why? Because He was talking to the Pharisees. Did they ever do any of these things over the sinners and tax collectors and gentiles? It’s probably safe to say that most did not, but some certainly could have, and there is an example of one who did—St. Paul, who recognized that he was lost, chief of sinners, and is found, restored and forgiven in Christ crucified, and wrote:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified...For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:15-16, 19-20)

and

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. 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, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:16-19)

You see, that St. Paul also wrote, “God our Savior...desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4) He wants all to come to repentance, from the younger son who squanders all that God gives him and doesn’t recognize God as the giver of all, to the older son who believes he has earned God’s favor over the younger son for his continued obedience (or attempts at obedience). Both are lost and in need of God’s grace.

God is passionate for the lost—like the Father who runs down the road to embrace his young son and out of the house to plead with his older son. He welcomes sinners—younger sons, older sons, tax collectors, Pharisees, Gentiles, Jews, Paul, you, and me—and He eats with them; the Lamb of God is slain, and the feast is spread. God the Father is prodigal—extravagantly gracious! He finds the lost in the death of His only-begotten Son; He finds you in the death of His only-begotten Son. Since you are found, you are a son of God—forever! You are embraced, robed, marked with the sign, forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.