

3/27/22

Fourth Sunday of Lent.

Pastor Priewe

Text: Luke 15:1-3,11-32

Theme: The Father's Prodigal Heart

It was 3:37 pm on a Saturday afternoon, the day before last Easter. I was running down the sidewalk to the pharmacy to get a Covid test at 3:45PM, the last test of the day before it closed. I had scheduled the test about 10 minutes before when I found out I would need it, and I raced down the elevator of Children's hospital, out the door, and started running. It was a mile and a half to the pharmacy, and I needed to get a test because our daughter, Josie, who had just been born a day and a half earlier, was upstairs getting her first brain MRI. In the meantime, I needed to get a Covid test so that we could stay at the Ronald McDonald house next door.

Thanks to the adrenaline, I arrived with a few minutes to spare, but found out I could only get a test in the drive-thru, and after a lively conversation with the pharmacist through the window, I found out that a drive-thru apparently requires a car, which I didn't have because I ran, and because I had ridden two hours in the ambulance the day before to the hospital. It didn't matter. No car, no test! So, I frantically convinced a random elderly gentleman named Bob who was waiting in line in his car to let me sit in his back seat for a moment while I took the test. I was going to do whatever it took to get that test.

Now I had only been a father at that point for a day and a half, but there was something about the nature of God's heart as a father that had come alive in me in that last day and a half. My heart was ready to move heaven and earth if I had to, to do what was needed for my little child, especially in her distress. So even a father with a sinful heart like me can have love that serves as a pale reflection of our Father in heaven and his love. As our hymn just exclaimed! *"How deep the father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure!"* (CW 21, 523).

That's the aspect of this parable I want you to focus on as you hear it for maybe the second time or the two-hundredth time—the father's heart! So often this parable is called the parable of the "Prodigal Son", but that son isn't even the main character, and he's not the only one we could consider "prodigal" in the story. If you think that synonyms for "prodigal" are wayward, or rebellious, you'd be just like me, and you'd also be wrong. The word "prodigal" means spending or giving freely, extravagantly, or even recklessly and wastefully. By that definition, the father is just as prodigal as his son. Watch for *the Father's Prodigal Heart* in each scene of this parable.

Before we launch in, we need to make one last stop to see the context of the parable and the audience to whom it's addressed. St. Luke tells us at the beginning of the chapter, **"Now the tax-collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Then Jesus told them this parable."** (15:1-3) The audience for the three parables that make up the "lost and found" chapter of the Bible seems to be both of those groups, the pharisees and the sinners. Watch for those two groups to be represented in the parable.

**"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.'"** (15:11,12) Now for a younger son to do this would have been a grave insult! He was basically saying to his Father, "Dad, I can't wait for you to die fast enough, so give me my inheritance now." He wanted his father's stuff, his father's blessings, but not the Father himself.<sup>1</sup> "Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! The younger son had a classic case of a deadly disease called "me-first-itis".

But we already begin to see the father's heart. He deals graciously with his Son, and he goes to great lengths to sell his property and divide it so that he might give one third to the younger son. The custom of the day was that the eldest son would inherit a double portion

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, "Prodigal God". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEYcvBTKVVM>

because he would take over the family and the estate and see to it. So when this son had his third, **“He gathered together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.”** (15:13). So he becomes the “prodigal son,” spending all he had until it was gone and then he began to be in need. Soon he finds himself as a servant, wallowing in pig muck, feeding unclean animals, which would have been a big “no-no” for a Jewish man. And he’s so desperately hungry that he longs for the pig pods to eat, and nobody will even give him those.

Has this young prodigal gallivanting version of yourself made an appearance in your life? You chafed under the rules until you could get out and sew some wild oats in order to find yourselves, leaving all kinds of wreckage in your wake. Well, it’s not until the son hits rock bottom that he realizes how lost he is, and it brings him to the desperate realization that he has ruined everything. When he came to himself, sets his sights on home and starts rehearsing his speech, **“I will set out and go back to my father and say to him; ‘Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father”** (15:18-20). So ends scene one and imagine how those “sinners” might have identified with the prodigal son, just as we can point to the “pig muck” moments of our lives.

Now it’s time for scene two, the prodigal father. Every night as he comes in the house, he glances off down the driveway into the horizon, wondering, hoping, longing for this to be the day that he catches sight of his lost son. And when that day comes, the father runs out to him. Realize this wouldn’t have been dignified behavior for the patriarch of the family to go running, especially after the damage and disgrace this son had caused. We’d expect him to bolt the door and make his son come and grovel.

But the father’s heart has no regard for his own dignity. **“[He] saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”** (15:20). Mind you, this son is still covered in pig muck, but it makes no difference to the father as he falls upon his smelly neck and hugs and kisses him! The son starts pouring out the words of his speech, but the father doesn’t even let him finish before he dispatches the servants to get the best robe and the signet ring. Then he does something even more extravagant. He calls for the fattened calf to be slaughtered, which was something that would only happen if you were going throw a feast for the whole community on the most special day of your life.<sup>2</sup> And to this father, this day was fit for some prodigal, extravagant celebration, **“For this Son of mine was dead and is alive again: he was lost and is found.”** See the father’s prodigal heart as he spares no expense! He recklessly pours out his abundant love on his undeserving son!

Prodigal sinners, this scene is for you to know that our Prodigal Father in heaven wants you back home with him, even when you’re covered in pig muck. That’s how deep the Father’s love for us is. He’s willing to crush our condemnation beneath his foot if it means he gets to have us back as children. So great is his joy to have you home. He and all heaven must celebrate.

There’s one character in this story, however, who is not “prodigal”. In fact, he’s stingy and exacting, he’s subservient, he’s the rule follower. He’s the “righteous” elder son. To him, everything should be given on the basis of deeds, and he believes he has the deeds to back it up. He comes in from his day’s labor to the sound of a celebration he can’t believe is happening. He questions the servants and after finding out the situation he refuses to go in.

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<sup>2</sup> Keller, Prodigal God

He withholds himself and now he's the one disgracing his father, refusing to join the family. But the prodigal father's heart once again shines through as he comes out to implore his eldest son, who is about to display just how lost he is as well with his words, **"Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders, yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"** (15:29,30). This complaint makes perfect sense to us. "That's no fair!" we might yell.

Here we find his words, "You never gave me!" stem from the same bitter disease as his brother's "Give me, give me.!" Now both sons have suffered from a deadly case of "me-first-itis" that drives them away from the father's love.

The eldest son didn't want to see one more penny of his money being wasted on **"this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes,"** and especially not the fattened calf, the costliest thing the family still had. He refuses to even call him his brother. Still the prodigal father expends himself freely and pleads, **"My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and his found."** (15:31).

That's how the parable ends, but we never hear if the eldest son went in or not. He's still outside when it ends, but the father wanted him to share his joy inside the feast. It was no deficit in the father's prodigal heart and his reckless love. For the Pharisees listening, they would have bristled at the implication that there were sinners on the inside sharing the father's joy, while they were left outside the feast, lost.

So where do you find yourself in the scenes of the story? Maybe you can see yourself as either son, the prodigal black sheep of the family or the obligatory obedient one. There's good lessons to learn from both of them. But the character Jesus wants you to focus on is the one he mentions 12 times in this parable, *the Prodigal Father* with his loving heart who welcomes his son back in and goes out to his vengeful son to bring him in as well.

That's the prodigal heart beating within the chest of Jesus as he sits and eats with sinners and tax-collectors. That's the heart that cries out within Jesus as he longs to bring the pharisees into the feast, through they are unwilling. That's the prodigal heart that moves heaven and earth to seek and to save what was lost, because that's what the Father had sent him to do. We do have a prodigal Father who did not spare his own son, but freely gave him up for us all. And we see another Son, unlike the first two, not wasteful nor vengeful, but prodigal indeed, in that he did not hold back from shedding every drop of blood needed to take away the sins of the world. How deep his love for us truly was!

As you leave today, I certainly want you to go home knowing *the Father's Prodigal Heart* that loves you, restores you, and seeks you again and again. But I also want you to go home showing the *Father's Prodigal Heart* to your children who may one day find their way back home. Welcome them, forgive them, restore them. Have a feast and celebrate! And I want you to go out to fields you work in, showing his heart to those who keep themselves outside the feast. Plead with them to come and share the joy of the feast. That's what each of these "lost and found parables" end with—JOY. Know the Father's heart, show the Father's heart, and share in his joy with all the sinners he receives at the feast. Amen.

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are!

