

## *Prodigal Grace*

We have all heard this story, right? It has been called the greatest short story in the folklore of Western culture. When I was in my twenties I left the church. I was angry at the leadership and wanted a break. So I left. And then after some crazy years in my life, I returned to God and returned to the church and so I always identified with the Prodigal Son. I was the one who left and was welcomed back.

Years later, when I was a pastor I was leading an exercise in a bible study called "Lectio Divina" where you hear the scripture read, with your eyes closed, you meditate on what you heard, you pray and then contemplate for new insight. So when we got to the prodigal, I knew which character would resonate with me, because it always did. I was the prodigal. I once was lost but now I'm found, right?

However, during this exercise, I realized something. The more I heard this story, the more I realized I was the older sibling. You see, my brother was a drug addict and an alcoholic who was in and out of our lives for about 10 years. He would come home, sober up, and then after a while, would disappear and we didn't know where he was. He would come home again and again, and over and over again my parents would let him back in the door. I was outraged that this continued to happen, that they allowed themselves to be doormats by their own son! I moved all of my things to Kentucky where I was going to school at the time so I would not have to deal with this anymore.

So you better believe that when I was leading the Lectio Divina exercise and reading our scripture this morning, it was like God was taking a 2x4 and slapping me upside my head! That's who you are, Jill! You aren't the prodigal, you are really the older sibling who is ticked off at the parents for allowing the son to come home again!

So let's dive in to our scripture this morning and maybe you, too, will get a new understanding. We call this the Parable of the Prodigal son, but it is more than the story of one foolish young man. It is a brilliant portrayal of three prodigals. There is the younger son who became lost in a foreign land and estranged from his father's moral and spiritual standards. There is the older son who was spiritually lost while physically at home, he's a person clearly full of resentment and unable to comprehend his father's boundless love.

And finally there's the father, who was no less a prodigal in the literal sense of that word. Prodigal can mean extremely generous, lavish.

But before we talk about the family, we need to look at the context in which Jesus told this story. Religious leaders were expressing their outrage over the way Jesus associated with individuals who were considered sinners by those with a more orthodox way of evaluating people.

The scribes and the Pharisees used a broad brush to paint anyone who didn't keep all of their ritual expectations for cleanliness and holiness. Those excluded individuals were called the people of the land and good Jews were to have nothing to do with them either socially or commercially.

But Jesus clearly didn't agree. He continually reached out to these excluded people, bearing their burdens, taking time to heal them and often breaking bread with them.

So to justify his outreach to Gentiles and to illustrate his insistence that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous who do not need to repent, Jesus told three parables of "lost things": the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and then our lesson for today, the parable of the prodigal son.

So here is a recap of the parable of the prodigal son. A man has two sons. The younger has had a pretty good life but figures he's ready to set out on his own and goes and demands his inheritance. "Hey dad, you're not dying quick enough for my taste, so I'll just take the cash now, if you don't mind. But instead of giving his son a smack upside the head, the dad says sure, and sends him on his way with padded pockets.

The son lives it up, very irresponsibly and soon runs out of money, just in time for a famine. He gets a job feeding pigs and finally comes to his senses when the pig slop starts to look appetizing. Realizing even his dad's servants have a better life than he does now, he decides to go back home and beg for a job. He's got a big speech all prepared and is totally ready to grovel. He heads home and his dad sees him a long way down the road and books it to him.

Before the son can even get half his speech out, the father is hugging and kissing him and clothing him and ordering a huge celebration to welcome his son home. The older son is as confused as you and I are about the prodigal son's reception but the dad is just happy that his son is finally home.

I want us to look at that word prodigal. It is commonly used to describe the son who squanders his inheritance. Yet this parable invites us to consider how God's grace is also prodigal – meaning extravagant, lavish, illogical. I think that that is the most important thing for us to remember about Jesus: that he had an unbounded, extravagant love for everyone. In reality, Jesus was the prodigal son, the one who was unbounded in his caring and so generous in his love that he made the religious people crazy.

We need to remember this as we face controversial issues in our church and in our society. I have no doubt that Jesus would champion the immigrants and refugees in our America, reminding us that the Hebrew Scriptures are clear and consistent in their call for compassion and support for the foreigner and sojourner in our midst.

I am confident that Jesus would encourage women to leave abusive relationships, we would sponsor a person overcoming addiction and advocate for health and wellness for all.

Because I am convinced that Jesus had an unbounded, extravagant love for everyone. I believe Jesus would stand in solidarity with our LGBTQIA siblings. I believe he would fight along side parents of transgender children in Texas as they struggle to get whatever help they need to their child to keep them alive! Jesus said he came that all people might have life and have it in abundance – all people. All people, like students in Florida who are not allowed to discuss why another student's parents are two daddys or two mommies. Don't say gay, they say.

I know that because Jesus had an unbounded, extravagant love for everyone, he would be weeping for our church when conservative Christians here in America have done to our African brothers and sisters and encouraged them to pass laws to make homosexuality a capital offense. When those on the right are wanting to leave our denomination and will do whatever they can to take as many people as possible because of a few wrongly interpreted scripture in the Old testament, Jesus weeps.

The parable that is at the heart of our Gospel lesson could be the story of many families within this or any congregation. I think we have all known of situations where a son or a daughter cannot endure the oppression of parents and home. The reasons vary but the end is invariably a flight from parental influence and control.

There was a time when I thought the behavior of the father in the parable, who gave his belligerent child one-half of his estate was not believable. I have tempered that evaluation as I have observed parents going to great lengths to indulge their children, to say nothing of the children who often bankrupt their parents through their unbridled behavior.

The young man in our story followed his heart and took off to a distant country. He soon learned what many high paid athletes and rock stars discover when the money is gone, the entourage quickly disappears. In the midst of his poverty and despair, the young man came to his senses and decided to return to his home. He planned a little speech of apology, but his father saw him from afar and immediately welcomed him home with the outward signs of restoration – a robe, a ring and sandals. And because the father was so filled with joy, he spontaneously announced a party.

But one critical person was not in on the welcome or the decision to celebrate this homecoming. The older brother has been working out in the fields. No doubt it was late when he returned. As he approached their home he must have been surprised to hear the music and joyous laughter. WE sense his smoldering annoyance as he called a young servant and asked, "What's going on here?" He quickly learned the reason for the celebration.

I cannot think of another story in the Bible where resentment, indignation and pure rage are more palpable than in this scene. The elder son is so angry that it is a wonder he didn't burn down the barn! Like many older children, he was the one who always did what was expected. He was dependable, industrious, and certainly had never caused his father any pain and anxiety. He was the child you could count on. But what did he ever get? Nothing! And now this mess of a younger brother shows up to sponge off his inheritance and this is cause for celebration? No way would he have any part of it.

John Vannorsdall, the former chaplain at Yale University, imagines the Elder Son saying something like this: Do you think that I had no moments when I wanted to leave? That I have no hunger for wine, women and song? Do you think I was born a drudge? No, I was born an elder brother, son of aging parents who looked at me to share the responsibility of being an owner. From the day I was born I was reared to be accountable, as though my parents, the servants and all the generations to follow were dependent upon me. I was reared to be

responsible. I say this with only a touch of pride, certainly not with regret. I say it only in the hope that you will understand me.

And we can't forget the third prodigal in our story: the Father. Here was a man who was extremely generous, lavishing his love on his sons. Here was a man of infinite compassion, unconditional love, spontaneous forgiveness that emanated from a kind and gracious heart.

Here, in this man, we see the essence of the God that Jesus came to reveal to us. A God, who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out arms to bless and to protect. This is a God who never forces but waits in patience.

In my many years of preaching, I have focused my preaching on the two sons. But as I get older I am drawn to the prodigal father. The dramatic feature in the story is obviously the return of the son from the far country. But I believe the father was just as determined to reach out to the older son as he was to embrace the lost son. The two young men were very different but the father had love enough to embrace them both.

I believe the central purpose of this parable is not the return of the younger son but the amazing nature of the father's love. Jesus told this story to help us understand the nature of God's love. Here we see God's love in action, and it is a love that forgives without condition, a love that restores without counting the cost, a generous love that holds nothing back.

This story challenges us to see that there is no time when we can be more god-like in the living of our lives than in those moments when we are truly generous, when we forgive those who have offended us and when we do all in our power to be instruments of peace and reconciliation.

Philip Yancey wrote the book *What's So Amazing About Grace* and he was on a podcast with Kate Bowler and at the end of the episode, Bowler offers a closing blessing. "Somehow, we are the recipients of this mysterious gift. Yes, even them. The rude neighbor, the estranged father, the unforgiven ex, the boss who screwed you over, the doctor who messed up, the selfish pastor, the family member who did the unthinkable. Despite what we have all done and left undone, we are graced...Blessed are we who live here in this mystery, in this scandal of grace.

I close with a prayer from our Full to the Brim Daily Devotional Cards, let us pray:

Holy God, help me remember that when it comes to the story of the prodigal son, I play all three roles. I can make the same mistakes, but I can also make the same gracious choices. Therefore, help me be like the prodigal son who was quick to apologize. Help me be like the older brother who aimed for righteousness, and help me be like the father, who celebrated love at every turn. I can be all three. Amen.