

March 27, 2022
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Lent 4
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“The Prodigal Father”

“... let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

The same item can often be labelled in different ways. In my home state, there is an ongoing debate over whether to call a foot-long sandwich a “sub” or a “hoagie,” and the unofficial state breakfast meat is alternately labelled as “pork roll” and “Taylor ham.” When I moved away from New Jersey, I discovered that instead of referring to products such as Pepsi as “soda,” people called it “pop.” When I moved to Canada, I was introduced to a series of new labels: grades in elementary school were called “Grade 6” instead of “sixth grade.” The items that catch rainwater on the edges of roofs are not “gutters,” but “eavestroughs.” When I was asked if I needed a “serviette,” I had no idea what this person was talking about until I discovered that it is another name for “napkin.” It might reflect regional or cultural differences, but there are times when we must learn new labels for things that have been familiar parts of our lives.

Differences in labelling are also quite common in the Bible. The mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments is known as both “Mount Sinai” and “Mount Horeb.” The body of water at the centre of much of Jesus’ ministry is known as the “Sea of Galilee,” the “Sea of Tiberias,” and the “Lake of Gennesaret.” Person’s names often change in the Bible; God establishes the covenant with Abram, who is better known as Abraham; his grandson Jacob is renamed Israel, the name of the nation who will be the bearers of this covenant promise. Simon son of Jonah is renamed “Peter” by Jesus when he declares that *“you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”* (Matthew 16:18). After his conversion on the road to Damascus, Saul of Tarsus is known by a new name: the Apostle Paul. A label in many of these cases helps us look upon a person or place in a new light, and better understand what is happening in the lessons we are hearing from God’s Holy Word.

Today’s Gospel lesson is one of the most familiar texts in the Bible and is almost universally known by the title “the Parable of the Prodigal Son.” It is one of three parables in Luke 15 that have the common theme of joy in finding what was lost or recovering a person who was estranged. The common themes that link the parables

are evidenced in the repetition of the terms “lost” (*apollymi*) and “found” (*heurisko*). But while these parables are often labelled as parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, or the Lost or Prodigal Son, it must be noted that Jesus never gives titles to any of his parables; the familiar titles of these and other parables (such as “the Good Samaritan”) were later assigned by human editors. In the case of today’s Gospel lesson, the traditional label assigned to this parable may be detrimental to our understanding the true message in this parable of a father and his two sons.

The three parables that Jesus shares in this chapter are in response to the reaction of the Pharisees and scribes to the people with whom Jesus is sharing a meal: “*And the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’*” (15:2). This act of “murmuring” is similar to the complaints of the Israelites against Moses in the wilderness (“*The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.*” – Exodus 16:2). Tax collectors were often despised by the Jewish people because they collected taxes for the Romans and were notoriously corrupt; those designated as “sinners” by the Pharisees would have included not only person who broke moral laws but also those who did not maintain ritual purity as practised by the Pharisees (also seen when they asked Jesus “*why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?*” – Mark 7:5). The scandal was that Jesus received such outcasts, shared table fellowship with them, and even played host to them; “*the question posed by the parables is whether we will join in the celebration – but to join in the celebration with God one must also share in God’s mercy.*” (Alan Culpepper). Following his parables on the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, which end with Jesus’ declaration that “*there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents*” (15:10), Jesus introduces a third parable about “*a man who had two sons*” (15:11). With no further information or background on this family, the younger son asks his father to “*give me the share of the property that will belong to me.*” (15:12). Such a demand is both disrespectful and irregular; the younger son is breaking family ties and treating his father as though he were already dead: “*asking for his share before his father’s death ... was the equivalent of saying ‘I wish you were dead.’*” (N.T. Wright). Sirach, a Jewish sage, counselled against such premature distribution of one’s goods:

- “To son or wife, to brother or friend, do not give power over yourself, as long as you live; and do not give your property to another, in case you change your mind and must ask for it. While you are still alive and have breath in you, do not let anyone take your place ... at the time when you end the days of your life, in the hour of death, distribute your inheritance.” – Sirach 33:20-21, 24.

Rabbinic judgments protected the rights of the father in the event that he agreed to make an early distribution of his goods: *“If a man assigned his goods to his sons he must write, ‘From today and after my death.’”* According to Mosaic law, which may have been designed to protect the rights of the elder brother against favoured younger brothers, the elder brother received a double portion of the inheritance (*“He must acknowledge as firstborn the son of the one who is disliked, giving him a double portion of all that he has; since he is the first issue of his virility, the right of the firstborn is his.”* – Deuteronomy 21:17).

Contrary to all expectations and these teachings, the father agrees to divide his property between the two sons, which must have come as a shock to Jesus’ audience. The inheritance must have been substantial, since it takes the younger son a few days to gather everything he has inherited and to leave home: *“A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.”* (15:13). He leaves not only his family but his homeland; the “distant country” would be in Gentile territory, away from the land the Lord gave to Abraham and his descendants. Despite the warning of Proverbs that *“a child who loves wisdom makes a parent glad, but to keep company with prostitutes is to squander one’s substance”* (Proverbs 29:3), the younger son quickly squanders his entire inheritance in “debauched living” (*asotos*), a phrase that occurs in other places in the New Testament:

- “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery” – Ephesians 5:18.
- “I left you behind in Crete for this reason, that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you: someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious.” – Titus 1:5-6.
- “You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.” – 1 Peter 4:3.

The younger son’s timing could not have been worse, for *“when he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.”* (15:14). Having renounced his family, the son attaches himself to a Gentile who orders him to feed pigs, which were an abomination to his Jewish heritage (*“And the pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, is unclean for you. You shall not eat their meat, and you shall not touch their carcasses.”* – Deuteronomy 14:8). So complete was the younger son’s fall and so desperate his hunger that he *“would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs ate; and*

no one gave him anything.” (15:16). The younger son’s destitution is complete; “*he reaped the bitter fruit of his foolishness.*” (Culpepper).

The younger son’s return begins in the mire of the swine pen; there he “*came to himself,*” which means that he came to his senses and realizes the harm he has caused. He recognizes “*his loss of status, the deteriorating social condition that developed from his series of actions*” (Joel Green). Having hit rock bottom, he renounces his foolish behaviour and resolves to return to his homeland and his family: “*I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘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.’*” (15:18-19). He does not expect to receive forgiveness from his father or to be welcomed back into the family; the best he hopes for is that he will be allowed to be a servant, since even his father’s servants have more to eat than he does: “*How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!*” (15:17).

We are not told how long the younger son had to journey between the distant country where he had been reduced to nothing and his father’s home, but we can imagine that along the way he rehearsed his speech over and over while dreading the sort of reaction he might receive when he finally reaches his destination. Would his father even receive him, or will he be turned away? Will his father chastise him for his wastefulness and disrespect? Would he be allowed into the servants’ quarters, and how would the servants react when the son of their master suddenly takes his place in their midst? There were no guarantees that his lot would improve now that he has “*come to himself*” and decided to come home. But what the son does not realize is that the father has been waiting for his return ever since he left, that even though he had turned his back on his father, the father’s love was so great that he never gives up on his profligate son. “*The parable is of love and forgiveness and joy ... There is a condition worse than death, to be lost; there is a condition better than life, to be found.*” (Fred Craddock). While he was still far off, “*his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.*” (15:20). In ancient Palestine it was regarded as unbecoming – a loss of dignity – for a grown man to run; but even “*in a culture where senior figures are far too dignified to run anywhere, this man takes to his heels as soon as he sees his young son dragging himself home*” (Wright). The father is so thrilled to see his son that he ignores cultural norms and runs to welcome, embrace, and kiss his son before the son even apologizes. When he begins his well-rehearsed speech (“*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son*” – 15:21), the father interrupts him, giving instructions to his servants to “*quickly, bring*

out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get a fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” (15:22-24). The father publicly receives his son back into his house; it is a sign to the rest of the village that the boy is to be treated as his son again. His return re-establishes his place as his father’s son, and it is time to celebrate.

If Jesus’ parable ended here, then the title “the Prodigal Son” would be most appropriate; but the parable continues, focusing on the other of the father’s two sons. The celebration of the younger son’s return serves as the impetus for the story’s second movement: *“Now the elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.”* (15:25). Unaware of any scheduled celebration, the elder son asks a member of the household staff what is happening; the man informs him that *“your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.”* (15:27). Upon hearing this news, the elder brother becomes so angry that he refuses to enter the house and join the celebration. When the father comes out and pleads with him to join the party, the elder son expresses his outrage over the injustice of the situation, pleading his merit and his brother’s treachery:

- “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when the son of yours comes back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” – 15:29-30.

The elder son is outraged because his faithfulness to his father seems to have been ignored in the father’s extravagant welcome for his prodigal son. There has been no repentance, not confession of sin, no offer to repay what has been squandered. The elder son feels like he has been taken for granted, that he is being ignored while everyone is celebrating the return of a son who has disgraced himself and his family and lost a significant part of the family fortune.

- “My guess is that he was not incensed by his younger brother’s return, or even by his father’s forgiveness of him, but by the celebration. Let the penitent come home, by all means, but let him come home to *penance*, not a party. Where is the moral instruction in that kind of welcome? What about facing the consequences of your actions? What about reaping what you sow? What kind

of world would this be if we all made a practice of rewarding sinners while the God-fearing folk are still out in the fields?” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

The father’s response to his outraged elder son serves to restore the family relationship, defend himself against the charge of injustice by the elder son, and justify celebrating the younger son’s return: *“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”* (15:31-32). The father desires the same reconciliation between his sons as the sons of Isaac experienced when *“Esau ran to meet [Jacob], and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.”* (Genesis 33:4). The father’s deepest desire is that *“if repentance for the prodigal son means learning to say ‘father’ again, then for the elder son it means learning to say ‘brother’ again.”* (Culpepper).

There is indeed a son who acts in a prodigal manner in this story; but the true prodigal throughout this parable is the father, the one whose love and forgiveness are given away in an extravagant fashion. No matter what the younger son did in the past – even turning his back on his father and acting as though he were dead – the father is overjoyed when the son returns home. Even though the son has been faithless, the father remains faithful to him. The prodigal father’s extravagant love for the younger son does not mean the rejection of the elder son, just as Jesus’ love for tax collectors and sinners does not negate our Lord’s love for Pharisees and scribes; *“such is God’s love, but we find it difficult not to be offended by God’s grace toward another, especially if we have serious questions about that person’s conduct and character.”* The more appropriate label for this parable would be “The Prodigal Father,” for it is the father who exemplifies the love of God that knows no limits, the love that God gives away extravagantly, the grace of God that is truly amazing because it saved even *“a wretch like me; I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”*

- “When Jesus loved a guilt-laden person and helped him, he saw in him an erring child of God. He saw in him a human being whom his Father loved and grieved over because he was going wrong. He saw him as God originally designed and meant him to be, and therefore he saw through the surface layer of grime and dirt to the real person underneath. Jesus did not *identify* the person with his sin, but rather saw in this sin something alien, something that really did not belong to him, something that merely chained and mastered him and from which he would free him and bring him back to his real self. Jesus was able to love men because he loved them right through the layer of mud.” – Helmut Thielicke.

We do not know if the elder son accepted his father's invitation to join in the celebration for his brother, but we can assume that this prodigal father would wait for this son as he had waited for the one whose return was a cause for rejoicing. Understanding that this is a parable about a *prodigal father* helps us understand the nature of God's love for us, that "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have everlasting life.*" (John 3:16). Our God is a prodigal Father because God loves us even when we are not loving; God is faithful to us even when we are faithless in return; God "*proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.*" (Romans 5:8). We may be prodigal children, or we may be faithful children; but God's love is for all God's children, and God's prodigal love is showered upon everyone. No matter how far we have wandered or how faithless we may have been, our prodigal father is watching and waiting for us to come home, for our God loves all God's children so much that he is calling us to "*return to the LORD your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love*" (Joel 2:13).

We may be prodigal sons and daughters – but we can rejoice that we have a prodigal God who is anxiously waiting to welcome us home!

Amen.