

Lent 4
March 27, 2022

**In the name of the God of all creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

The gospel reading from Luke begins this way:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So Jesus told them this parable: "There was a man who had two sons."

This story is all too familiar. We know it as the "Prodigal Son." But I'm not so sure that this story is so much about the son, as about the father.

The word "prodigal" means "wasteful expenditure," or "extravagant." Wasteful expenditure certainly applies to the younger son in this parable as he takes his share of his father's estate and spends it on "loose living" in a far country. Extravagant could also apply to the father's actions upon the younger son's return.

We know this story so well that we tend to look at it from only one side ... through only one lens. Perhaps the most prodigal person in this family is the father, for he is the one who spends both his money and his honor without counting any of the cost. And the question for us is, "How, and to whom, might we act as the Prodigal Father?" And, if we were to consider it in relation to this faith community, what might it mean for us to be a Prodigal Church?

This reading this morning is relatively long for a Sunday morning Gospel lesson. Yet, it still contains only the skeleton of what a first century Middle Eastern person would have heard when it was told.

- A son asks for his inheritance ... while his father is still alive and kicking. This was somewhat unheard of, and was an insult and dishonor to the son's family.
- However, the father gave his son his share of the estate. The son sold it, took the money and went to a "far country" where he spent it on loose living.
- This is part of the "prodigal" part ... the son is so wasteful that he ended up broke, and the only job he can find is tending pigs. To a Jewish audience this would have been heard as the worst of the worst jobs ... pigs were very non-kosher.
- In this muck and mire squalor of a pig pen the son "came to himself," and decided that he would return to his family. He figured that whatever job he would get at home would at least be better than tending pigs.
- As the son journeyed close to home, his father saw him coming. The father ran to him ... hugged him ... gave him a kiss ... and put a robe on his back and a ring on his finger. The father then threw an extravagant ... prodigal ... party for his younger son.

- In the meantime, the older son returned to his father's house after a hard day's work of tending the grape vines, or the olive orchard, or whatever it was he was dutifully doing. He heard the sound of the party, and that is when he found out that his younger brother had returned. Instead of being overjoyed, the older son became very angry.
- So, the father of the two sons left the party to talk to the older son ... the older son who was acting very self-righteous. The father responded to the older son's anger with "You have been with me always. What is mine is yours. But this brother of yours was dead and he is now alive ... he was lost but now is found."

There is a lot written between the lines in this story, and there are a lot of unanswered questions. but I think we all get the point. Where is the mother I all this? What was life like in this family ... what were the family dynamics ... before the younger son left for a far country? And, what happened to the family the following week ... the following month ... the following years?

Most often this parable is used to preach about God's open arms, regardless of what offenses we may have committed before deciding to change our ways. That surely is true. Yet, what does this tell us about our own behavior ... remember, this was parable was told as an answer to the accusation that Jesus frequented with sinners ... he even ate with them.

Perhaps the father can be seen as a metaphor for the faith community. Surely the two sons of the story live together in the Church as we know it. The younger son is like the person who comes to church out of hunger and desperation. And the elder son is the person who disparages the welcome given to the younger. It may be that this parable is not speaking about how God will act, but about how we could act toward the one who was dead but is now alive, the one who was lost but is now found.

The hungry son stands as a challenge to people of faith, as we consider how we treat the hungry ... the lost ... the marginalized ... those who have given up on the church. The citizens of the faraway country treated him justly but not warmly. He was welcomed to work, but was given nothing else ... neither food, nor the emotional sustenance of a hug, a kiss, or a welcome. Sent to do the dirtiest and most menial task, the younger son was all but forgotten as one of the mass of the homeless poor, nameless and alone. By contrast, when he returned to the home he had rejected, and to the father he had dishonored, he was welcomed as a revered son of the house. He was given all of the emotional and physical nourishment he needed ... and his return became a gift to the whole community.

This parable asks of us hard questions. How do we treat those who come to our doors hungry and homeless? And I don't mean just literally hungry and literally homeless, but those who are hungry for love and spirit and community ... those who cannot find a home in any traditional faith community ... those who have given up on organized religion and church? In the parable, Jesus painted a picture of what the faith community could be ... a community that celebrates the return of every hungry person, not asking how or why that person was hungry, but welcoming that individual as part of the family of God. Such a move is prodigal ... it is

extravagant, but it is also foolish ... it is wasteful. The challenge is this ... what might it mean for us to be the prodigal church? Remember, a lot of people have trouble with organized religion ... Jesus was one of them.

The elder son may well be a bigger challenge to all of us in communities of faith. As dishonorable, arrogant, and greedy as this elder son was, he was also right. For all of the older son's justified rage, however, he erred the minute he said "this son of yours" instead of "this brother of mine." For even as he confronted his father with accepting his brother's shameful behavior, the elder son could not see the shamefulness of his own conduct. Out of his anger ... his self-righteousness ... he could not fathom the gentleness of his father, both toward his brother ... and toward him.

The elder son poses this difficult Lenten question: To whom are we unwilling to offer the father's prodigal welcome? Who are we unwilling to accept, because we know that we are right ... and they must be wrong? What would it cost to lay down our righteous indignation and come into the party to which we have been invited? Remember, this parable was prompted by the criticism of Jesus eating with "sinners." The scribes and Pharisees are often painted as cruel, but they are no different from many good, churchgoing people in their objection to Jesus' associations. The parable of the Prodigal challenges us again ... stop being "right" and come, join the party.

Garrison Keillor tells the story of a man who came home one Friday evening and announced to his wife that they were going to go camping at the quarry. His wife was not really happy about this since she had planned to binge-watch *Dancing With the Stars*. They had a few words, but, in the end, his wife begrudgingly climbed into their truck camper ... one of those that sat in the bed of a pickup truck ... and off to the quarry they went.

They arrived at the quarry ... the husband parked the truck on a little hill ... and they moved from the cab of the truck around to the camper ... all in a silence that you could cut with a knife. Once inside, the man's wife complained that the truck ... and the camper ... were not level. Now, instead of silence there were strong words shouted at each other until the husband said, "If you want the truck level, here are the keys. You find a level spot!"

His wife, fuming, took the keys, got out of the camper and went around to the driver's seat, and decided that the best level spot for the camper was their driveway at home. She started the engine, and the wheels spun as she took off toward town.

Now, unbeknownst to her, her husband was changing into his pajamas, just as the truck lurched forward throwing him against the back door. It popped open and he fell to the ground ... completely naked ... watching the truck drive off in a cloud of dust.

Here he was ... stark naked at the quarry ... in the evening chill ... with only a porch light from a lone house some distance away. Not knowing what else to do he headed for the house ... remember he was totally naked.

Now, the house belonged to two elderly sisters, and when they heard a knock on the door they were startled. They looked out the window and saw a naked man on their porch. One sister said to the other, "Oh my God, we have a naked man on the porch, we need to let him in and get him some clothes." But her sister responded, "We can't let him in the house ... he is naked!"

Garrison Keillor ends the story by saying, "This is the church today. Some of the people see a naked man and welcome him into their midst, and clothe him. Other people see a naked man and bar the door out of fear."

Week after week ... as I stand at the altar ... I say, "This is a banquet for all of God's people, and we welcome and encourage all to receive the bread and wine at our communion rail." At least that is what I said up until the COVID pandemic hit, and we stopped distributing both bread and wine. Anyhow, there have been those who ... like the Pharisees and scribes ... have criticize this open stance. They grumble and say, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." To them I want to say ... in the same love that the father has in this parable of the Prodigal ... stop being "right" and come, join the party.

The party was thrown for the Israelites at Gilgal as we heard in our first reading from the Book of Joshua ... a homeless people in an alien land. And in Paul's Second Letter to the new Christian community in Corinth he said, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God."

The hungry and homeless will come to our door ... those who need spiritual nourishment ... those who have given up on organized religion and church ... and those who are seeking shelter in a community of faith that will accept them. They are cold and vulnerable, and I, for one, say "Throw open the door and welcome them into our home." I really don't care how they got there, or why they are hungry or homeless. They are children of God ... and they are our brothers and sisters. I believe we are called to be that Prodigal Church by acting with radical hospitality to all of God's children.

Amen.