

Title: The Prodigal God
Text: Luke 15: 11 – 32
Date: March 31, 2019

On occasion I have confessed to you that I am tackling a text I have never preached on before, but I don't think that I could get away with telling you that today. In other years I have preached a whole series on this one parable, so I am going to be forced to practice restraint today. This parable almost gives us too much to think about in one sitting.

For starters, I think we need to be mindful of who was in the audience when Jesus presented this parable. The context is important! In verse 1, which we did *not* read, it says, "**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.'**" Hmmm. Scribes and Pharisees *grumbling* about the kind of crowd Jesus was attracting. Take note of that!!

This parable - the longest of all the parables in the gospels - consists of three scenes:
(1) the negotiations of the younger son with his father, and his subsequent departure to a foreign country where he is wasteful and becomes impoverished (15:11-19);
(2) the homecoming of that son, and the welcome by his father (15:20-24); and
(3) the interchange between the father and his older son (15:25-32).

I don't know if we fully appreciate how outrageous the younger son's request was. In those days when a father died the oldest son received a double portion of what the other children inherited. If a father had two heirs, the oldest would have gotten two-thirds of the estate and the younger would have received one-third. However, this division of the estate only occurred when the father died. When the younger son asks for his inheritance *now*, it was a sign of deep disrespect. In essence, it is like saying: "Drop dead, Dad!" Tim Keller points out that the younger son was essentially saying that he wants the father's things, but not his father.

Furthermore, it is not like the father was tapping into a trust fund established for his sons, and selling off some mutual funds. In order for the father to give the younger son his share of the estate now, his father would have needed to sell off property, livestock, etc. The father's status and standing in the community would have been diminished. If the son's *request* would have been considered outrageous, the father's acceding to these demands would have been considered equally outrageous.

We have another picture of extremes painted with what the younger son did with his ill-conceived gain. We all know how the son went to a distant land – the Middle East equivalent of Las Vegas – and squandered everything in wild living. We have a picture of him totally hitting rock bottom. Not only was he broke, but – to make matters worse - the land in which he was living was experiencing a famine. He ended up offering himself as an indentured servant, and taking care of pigs. This is bad enough in itself, but to a Jew this would have been a profound shame.

I love the line where he says, "**When he came to himself . . .**" Sometimes translated, "**When he came to his senses . . .**" Sometimes we lose a sense of who we are on a deep level – we forget our True Self. Sometimes you have to hit rock bottom before you remember who you are. Richard Rohr would call this "Falling Upward."

And then there is the story of his dramatic return, and the extravagant welcome of the father. The father showed no dignity as he ran to meet his son. Is this what a reasonable parent would

do? At the very least one would be thinking, "This better be good!" Before you open the door to your house you would want to know, "Did he learn his lesson? Does he have a drinking problem? Does he have a drug problem? Is he still a playboy? Does he have a plan? Is he ready to take life seriously?" So many questions! We have to remember, though, that *this parable is not intended to be part of a parenting seminar.*

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There is sooooo much that could be said of this, but in the interests of time I want to cut that line of questioning short and take a closer look at the other brother. Remember, this all started as a parable of a man who had *two* sons – yet most people focus on the younger son – "the prodigal son."

The dialogue in 15:27-32 speaks volumes about how alienated the elder son now is from his father *and* brother. He *too* has, in a sense, gone into "**a distant country**," psychologically speaking.

We read that, "**He became angry and refused to go in.**" (15: 25 – 28) Who could blame him for being angry? For the father to throw such an extravagant party, he was in fact taking all that expense directly out of the elder son's inheritance!

Realizing that the older son was not a part of the festivities, the father went out, and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "**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 this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!**" (15: 28 – 30)

Ouch! His language is dripping with resentment. He is not as much sorrowful, as deeply angry and bitter. He says, "**I have been working like a slave for you!**" He has *not* been delighting in his good deeds, but seeing them as a calculated means of controlling his environment. "Elder brother spirit" is joyless, fear-based compliance. He refers to "**this son of yours**," denying any sense of relationship.

We can see now that both sons had a lot in common. They *both* were guilty of wanting the father's things, but not wanting a relationship with the father. They just went about it in a different way. The difference is that the younger brother eventually returns, and is restored to relationship with the father.

The story is left open-ended. We really don't know if things were ever resolved with the older brother. The scribes and Pharisees – the original audience of this parable – were left to answer that question on their own.

There are many people today who have abandoned any kind of religious faith because they see clearly that the major religions are simply full of "elder brothers." The anger and superiority of elder brothers and sisters – all growing out of insecurity, fear, and inner emptiness – can create a huge body of guilt-ridden, fearful, and spiritually blind people. Elder brother types don't begin to grasp the expansive nature of God's love. It just doesn't make sense!

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This, however, is the point that I want you to walk away with: God's grace *doesn't* make sense by our calculating standards. We have warm associations with this story, but that is *not* the

reaction that people would have had in Jesus' times. It would have been considered flat-out outrageous. It wouldn't make sense!

The word prodigal / 'prädægəl / could be understood as

- 1) Recklessly extravagant
- 2) Having spent everything

Most people refer to this story as the parable of the Prodigal Son. I would like to suggest that we think of it as The Parable of The Prodigal God. God's love and mercy is a lot more recklessly extravagant than we can imagine.

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So what about us? Shepherdstown Presbyterian professes to be a church that celebrates this reckless, extravagant love. As lofty a vision as that is, the reality is that we are comprised of both younger brothers and older brothers; or should I say, younger siblings and older siblings.

I love that we are often referred to as "the church of last resort." Often times people come to us who have been beat up by the world; or worse, beat up by other churches. Such people can be fragile. They often rehearse their speech before coming in the door, because they are so sure they will be rejected. Their approach is tentative.

We boldly portray a sign that says, "We Choose Welcome" – a reflection of our theology. I need to warn you, however, that *truly* choosing welcome assures you that *change is unavoidable*. Are you ready to choose welcome . . . *really*? If you are, you will be receiving younger siblings who are undisciplined, who are not familiar with the ways of the older siblings who have been slaving away faithfully for lo these many years.

We don't know how the story ends in the parable. Did the elder brother drive off the younger brother, who was clueless when it came to doing things decently and in order? Or did the elder brother eventually accept the invitation to come to the party? We don't know. I do know, however, that if the elder brother *did* genuinely accept this radical and culturally absurd invitation, that nothing would ever be the same again.

Choosing radical welcome is the signature act of a Prodigal God. If you are serious about coming to this party, don't think for a moment that things will stay the same. You can kiss your traditions goodbye once the word gets out that you *truly choose welcome*. To be clear, though, this is not a threat. It is an invitation to a party.

How does the story end? I don't know. I look forward to reading your newsletter in a couple of years.

Amen.

Luke 15: 11 – 32

"Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. "The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. "A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. "When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. "So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to

feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with ¹⁷the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁸But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁹I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ²⁰I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²¹So he set off and went to his father. But 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. ²²Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²³But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²⁴And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁵for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁶"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁷He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁸He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁹Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ³⁰But he answered his father, '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. ³¹But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³²Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³³But 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.'"