

Binkley Baptist Church

“Prodigal Wanderings, Prodigious Grace”

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IV Lent

Luke 15: 11-32 (Prodigal Son-Loving Parent)

If you've never stumbled along your journey, fallen, broken promises, disappointed others and disappointed yourself, then this sermon isn't for you. And, by extension, neither is the gospel. Every single one of us here this morning, if honest, knows both the pain of being forsaken and doing the forsaking. Injured and the source of injury. I don't know why we have such a difficult time acknowledging that truth.

Luke 15 is known as the “gospel within the Gospel” where lost sheep, lost coin, lost son/daughter/child are all found and there's rejoicing all around. These parables—found only in the Luke—follow the introductory word: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus; and the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” (Luke 15: 1-2). So Luke places the parables—at least in part—here in response to the complaint of some that Jesus isn't showing adequate discriminant judgement. No self-respecting Messiah pals around with sinners, much less has them for dinner companions.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: “There is no deeper pathos in the spiritual life of man than the cruelty of ‘righteous’ people. If any one idea dominates the teachings of Jesus, it is his opposition to the self-righteous of the ‘righteous.’”

He also once famously encouraged Christians to try to behave at least as well as your pagan neighbors. I was speaking with a good pagan friend the other day and noted that since my divorce nearly five years ago I hadn't heard a peep from a favorite aunt. He said, “She must be a Christian.” Ouch.

You know this story by heart I reckon: “There was a man who had two sons...” and off we go. And depending upon which season of life you are in (and I'm not referring to age) you'll react and respond favorably or unfavorably to each of the characters—prodigal younger brother, bitter and older brother, imperfect but loving father-parent.

The younger boy says to his father: give me my inheritance now. Divide the estate and you often divide the family. So right at the start of the parable an economic dimension has been introduced into our little drama, which happens to be very real in most families experiencing conflict: money. Whether the boy meant it like this comes off as—“Dad, you're dead to me;” which give other family members permission to say in rejoinder: “then you're dead to us too.” All of us here are familiar with that grave-yard of broken relationships.

Off he goes wandering and wondering how his new-found life will go—the script could've been different. He could have made it big and had great success, never needing to go home if only to brag and show off. That's true of some of our family stories, isn't it? But in the parable there's no such luck, only reckless, wasteful spending to the point of zero sum. How often our wanderings leave us penniless. To heighten the dramatic nature of the tale—a famine hits, high unemployment, long bread-lines, NO HELP WANTED signs posted everywhere except at the local pig farm. And there among the pig pods a discovery is made—born of what? Shame? Embarrassment? Failure? Hunger? Wanderlust is always advertised so nicely in the brochures. The boy “came to himself”—sarcastic cynics will say, “I bet he did. Poor thing.”

The boy says, "I will get up and go home to my father..." And he rehearses his confession and has it all planned out. He understands that relationship has changed—he's no longer son but he'll gladly settle for hired hand if it means bed and board. That will be enough. You've run through the lines of that inner dialogue, haven't you? Trying to explain, admit fault, recognizing how you blew it, not knowing what to expect from the one you've hurt.

"Treat me as servant not as son," he's memorized it. And so he sets off for home. Dad, of course, could have died in the time the boy had been away; the family place might have been auctioned off with the economic upheaval caused; house boarded up. No signs of life. What will he find when he gets home? Will there even be a home place still standing?

Well, the surprise of grace is that home comes running down the lane to bring it to him. Sandals fly off the old man's feet. "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." Delight not disdain controls the father's posture and response. It would have been right, fair, just, and understandable if he had made the boy grovel up the gravel road, gone unrecognized. "You're invisible to me. 'You're dead to me,' isn't that what you said when you left? Well the dead don't rise. Get off my porch."

But no, prodigious grace is given. Before the boy can finish his spiel about being hired as a servant, the Father in wild exaltation says:

"Robe! Ring! Sandals! Feast! For my child was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" Cue the music, let the party begin. And that's how fairy tale "happily ever-after" stories end. But this isn't a fairy tale, it's a gospel parable, and we haven't satisfied the reason it's been told to us, remember: "this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Grumble, grumble, grumble. Prodigal wanderings are to be met with gossip not grace, stern judgment not second chances.

The elder brother hears the music—he can't stand Amazing Grace, his favorite hymn is Amazing Karma, and loses it. One of the servants is the bearer of the news: "Your brother has returned, and your father has killed the fatted calf—BECAUSE HE HAS GOT HIM BACK SAFE AND SOUND." Pity the poor servant! The older son refuses to join the merriment and is seething inside. It's been said that for all the bad reasons the prodigal left home, he had at least one very good reason. Do you have a sister or brother like that? Or parent?

He never left the farm, but just like the younger boy, he never properly understood the nature of the relationship with his father either. He says, "All these years I have been working like a slave for you..." Never disobeyed, never strayed.

But just as true as is the saying "not all who wander are lost," so true is that not all who stay on the farm, pounding fence post/never partying are "found."

And of course, he's right to be resentful. He's well within his justifiable rights to take it as an affront to his father and to himself. Most juries side with the elder brother.

We can carry grievances and grudges, large and small, dramatic and piddly, for a long, long, long time. We mustn't ever underestimate our abilities to keep people in prisons of our own making. CS Lewis once said that it's easier to forgive a murderer than twenty years of accumulative slight.

And we have many valid and reasonable arguments for going the route of justice alone. Some awful and unspeakable things occur in our lives. Events so traumatic that our lives seem to be defined by them and difficult to imagine the future without that narrative.

When I was a very young and green minister in my first congregation in southern Indiana there was a woman in her eighties named Leah. Every visit I had with her in her home she would repeat the same script: her father, whom she adored, had died the summer before her senior year of high school. In order to keep the farm and help with the family

Leah's mother insisted that she drop out of high school. This was the source of great resentment and it was some measure of shame for Leah that she never graduated from high school. However she met and married a gentleman when she was in her mid-twenties and they moved to nearby Cincinnati where he had a successful tool and dye business. Each visit the same story. I had it memorized.

One day I borrowed a pastoral counseling technique from the wonderful John Claypool. "Leah, imagine your Mother being with us right now and sitting right in front of you. If she said, 'I'm sorry,' how would you reply?" Without missing a single beat the response came: "I'd say Mother it's too late."

W.H. Auden's line in the poem "As I Walked out One Evening" has always been helpful to me:

"O stand, stand at the window  
as the tears scald and start;  
you shall love your crooked neighbor,  
with your crooked heart."

You shall love both sons, both daughters, both parents, with your crooked heart. My Lenten prayer for us all is that we increase our capacity to extend welcoming grace to those who've wandered (ourselves included!) or hurt us. This is demanding and difficult work but it's the gospel we've been commissioned to announce. As the lesson read earlier put it: "God has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to God's self, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (II Cor. 5:18-19)."

Let us not forget that at the very heart of the gospel of Jesus, which is the glad good news of favor unconditioned, non-contingent favor of God, is forgiveness. Grace, prodigious grace (remarkable and impressively great), is given freely.

To live in God's terms is to live into God's future where reconciliation can lead to the rebirth of relationships.

May it be so that we are welcomed back home from prodigal wanderings with gobs of grace given.

May it be so that we do the welcoming.

May we find a table spread and a place reserved for each one of us.

Thanks be to God. Amen. And amen.