

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, March 27, 2022

4th Sunday in Lent/Year C

First Reading: Joshua 5:9-12

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Gospel Reading: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Sermon Title: “*Prodigal Love*”

Theme

Jesus tells a parable about a son who ponders his father’s love only after he has spurned it. The grace he receives is beyond his hopes. That same grace is a crisis for an older brother who believes it is his obedience that has earned his place in the father’s home.

Text

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.] ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³So he told them this parable: ^{11b}“There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A 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. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So 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 the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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.’ ”

Sermon

Have you ever had a *paradigm-shifting experience*? One of those times when what you believed was true without question for a long time, has suddenly changed?

Take for example, the rise of the electric car. Electric cars have been around for over a hundred years, but just in the last couple of years, a relatively short time in the automobile industry, that news has exploded. And every day it seems, there is a new player in the electric auto market – some of whom we've never heard of.

The gospel reading for today is that kind of experience for me. We have heard this story countless times in church and devotional readings as the parable of the *prodigal son*. It is without a doubt my favorite parable of Jesus and that is because it is *my* story. Fact is, my working title for this sermon was "My Story," but then as I studied the text this week, I had a paradigm shift caused by a new revelation about this parable.

The context is important so allow me to set it up for you. We are in chapter fifteen of Luke's gospel; chapter nineteen contains the Palm Sunday experience, so we are pretty close to the end of Jesus' public ministry. He has already gained a lot of notoriety and that has become a problem for some, most notably in this story, the Pharisees and the scribes.

Scribes in the New Testament are also referred to as "*lawyers*" as they were the legal jurists of their day. They were also referred to as the "*teachers of the law*" or sometimes "*rabbis*" because they not only studied the minutia of the law but also explained their interpretation to pupils and to all by whom they were consulted.

The other party, the Pharisees, were sometimes associated with the Chief Priests. Though they were not a class in Judaism in and of themselves, they were often spoken of alone, as if they were a distinct class of the community, as in our text for today. Throughout the whole life of Jesus, they were among his most watchful and determined opponents.

The Pharisees also maintained that an afterlife existed and that God punished the wicked and rewarded the righteous in the world to come. They also believed in a messiah who would herald an era of world peace.

Pharisees were, in a sense, blue-collar Jews who adhered to faith practices of Judaism such as individual prayer and assembly in Temple and synagogues.

So perhaps you can see why at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees were not always seen as bad guys in Luke's gospel; they were in fact looking for the Messiah, they just didn't believe it could be Jesus, because Jesus was a rule breaker and that was a deal-breaker in their minds.

In that way that Jesus had, he heard the murmurings of the Pharisees and the scribes, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" and so Jesus responds by telling them three related parables. The first is the parable of the lost sheep in which the good shepherd leaves the 99 to find the lost one. The second is the parable of the lost coin in which a widow searches her house until she finds her lost coin. And the third is our reading for today, sometimes known as the parable of the lost son.

Of course, you have heard numerous teachings on this parable and so we could spend some time discussing this successful man's spoiled sons.

There was the younger one who wanted his share so he could go to the Middle Eastern version of Las Vegas.

And there was the older one, who though stayed home and remained faithful to the family enterprise, never the less, disapproved of how his father handled his wayward brother's return.

Both were brats.

As we have already discussed, this parable is often called the parable of the prodigal son. But my guess is that there may not be one of you who truly knows what "prodigal" means. Oh you have deduced over the years, but you aren't really sure, are you? Well, allow me to educate you.

prodigal - adjective; 1. wastefully or recklessly extravagant 2. giving or yielding profusely; 3. lavishly abundant

You really don't know me that well, but whenever I have heard this story, I relate to the younger son, because there have been many times in my life where I have

turned my back on my Heavenly Father and all that is good that he has prepared for me, to seek my own way.

I always end up falling flat on my face and come crawling back. Probably none of you can relate, but that is why I was going to title the sermon on this text, “My Story” - because the story of the younger son is my story.

But this week, upon looking up what prodigal really means, it occurred to me that the real prodigal might just be the father. Work with me here. The definition I gave you was *wastefully or recklessly extravagant; giving or yielding profusely; lavishly abundant*. How do you feel about a successful businessman who gives his spoiled kid up to half of what he spent a lifetime building so that he could go blow it? Wouldn't you agree with me that the *father's* behavior might be considered *prodigal*?

Jesus told parables to illustrate a point. They have a deeper meaning than what is just on the surface. When we call this parable, the parable of the *prodigal son*, I think we redirect the focus of the parable from the father to the son. But I think the parable is really about *God and God's prodigal love* for creation.

Work with me here. God created humankind out of a need for a rich love relationship. Sure God could have created us to have natural instincts like all other created things, but scripture says that God created human beings just slightly lower than the angels. Why? Because God wanted to be loved by us voluntarily. He wanted us to choose to love him. But to get that kind of voluntary love, he had to give us free will. That my friends is reckless, and yielding profusely, and lavishly abundant.

I would imagine that around our community, no matter how you define community, fewer than 20% of people are in church this weekend. We are indeed, the younger sons in the parable. But I still say the story is not about us.

It would be easy for us, we who are here today and in churches throughout the community, to look down upon all those who are not in church today. That would make us the soulmates of the Pharisees and the scribes and also the kin of the older brother in the parable. But I still the story is not about us.

The reading begins,

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Then Jesus tells a story about a father that we hope parents do not emulate. He's the problem! He's the prodigal! He is reckless, and yields profusely, and is lavishly abundant!

And aren't we glad he is. We don't get what we deserve, do we?

Yes, Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. If he didn't we would never have a chance at life eternal with God. But God is prodigal. Praise God! Amen?

We are in Luke 15 on this fourth Sunday of Lent. In less than three weeks we will celebrate the prodigality of a God who, like the father in the parable, waits on the edge of the property, looking the direction he last saw his beloved children go. His heart is broken until they return.

And what price will he willingly pay to get our attention; to get us to turn back to him? He is willing to give his own flesh and blood in the form of Jesus, his Son, the teller of this story.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

In telling this story, Jesus says to the scribes and the Pharisees, “Let me tell you a story about the true loving nature of my father. He is so reckless with his love that there is room in the kingdom for sinners such as these. And if we humbly repent, which means to turn around – as the younger son did – then a feast awaits our return too.

Prayer

Prodigal Father, we are in awe of your great love for the human family. When we step back from ourselves and observe how we live our lives, we have to admit that we are a lot like the bratty sons in the story. Forgive us and continue to be patient with us and love us. And we do indeed thank you for your prodigal love, your reckless, and yielding profusely, and lavishly abundant love demonstrated in Jesus Christ. Amen