***THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL***

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Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

“There was a man who had two sons.” That’s how this familiar parable from Luke’s Gospel begins. From the very beginning the parable is about two sons and a father, not just one prodigal son. The word *prodigal* is not even in the parable! There is only a younger son and an older son and their father. “The younger son said to his father, ‘give me the share of the property that will belong to me’” To ask for that share while his father was living was to wish his father dead – and say that to his face! In response, the father does an odd thing. He gives his younger son what he asked for – and he also gives his elder son his share. He divides the property between them, says Jesus. It might have been no surprise had the father slapped his younger son across the face and booted him out of the house for his impertinence. Yet instead the father grants the request; he allows the son to fill his pockets and head out the door with his share of the estate. Is the father so soft-hearted or soft-headed that he doesn’t see the disaster about to come? Is he not being foolish in giving a portion of his estate to this obnoxious, spendthrift son? Perhaps. But it is his estate and his sons and his choice, and he chooses to grant his younger son’s request and divide his estate between them while he is still living.

If we are critical of that choice, perhaps it is because we know what the younger son does with his portion. He converts it to cash, runs away to a distant land, and promptly squanders it all. Every last shekel is spent to satisfy his selfish, prodigal desires. What seemed like so much when he left home, proves to be too little. To compound his problems, a severe famine hits and he is soon hungry, destitute and desperate. He is reaping what he sowed with his wayward ways. But he has not yet hit bottom. That comes when he takes the only job available – feeding pigs – and finds himself longing to eat the pigs’ feed. So hungry is he that even the pig slop has appeal. He has no one to turn to, no one to feed him, no one to help him. He is hungry and destitute and very much alone in a foreign land.

At that lowest of low points, Jesus says, “He came to himself”. One might imagine the words of the psalmist echoing from his lips,

“*Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice.*”

Why does it sometimes take disaster to bring us to our senses, turn us around, and get us back on track? Why don’t we learn sooner, before our world goes to pieces? The signs were all there as the cash slipped between his fingers, but he couldn’t see them, until he found himself in the pigpen, gazing longingly at the pig pods. Only then did he come to himself, confront what he had done, and resolve what he would do. He would go home. He would return to his father, confess his sin, and acknowledge that he was no longer worthy to be a son. He would ask his father to hire him as a servant, nothing more.

I suspect the scribes and Pharisees listening to Jesus were certain of what was to come. The younger son, like the tax collectors and sinners they scorned, was justifiably cast out for his wayward ways. They anticipated the moment when the younger son would return to the father he had rejected and find himself rejected. That would be the just result, the honorable thing for the father to do, to denounce the son who had so shamed the family. It is what they would do, perhaps what we might do.

But such is not the way of God, according to Jesus. The return of the younger son is met, not with judgment, but with compassion. In perhaps the most hopeful, grace-filled, loving words in Scripture, Jesus tells us:

*While the son was far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.*

The father didn’t wait for the son to find him. He didn’t wait for the son’s confession, humiliation, or apology; the father met him on the way. He ran to his wayward son and welcomed him home with a kiss, a ring, and a robe (the signs of sonship). He welcomed him in the road where the whole town could see and thus opened the possibility that the son might be restored, not only to the family, but also to the village.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Every sign pointed to justifiable anger from the father, but he acted with love – prodigal love, someone has called it. And while that phrase may sound a little strange, it is perhaps the most accurate. Prodigal means, “wastefully or recklessly extravagant”, and that pretty much describes the love of the father for his son – recklessly extravagant, even wasteful in the eyes of some, but graciously given by a loving father.

If you want to know why Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, then you need look no further than that expression of prodigal love by the vigilant father. Jesus didn’t wait for their confession, for their repentance, for their faith in him. He went to them. He reached out with prodigal love, with grace that accepted them before they were considered acceptable, just as he reaches out to us who have gone our wayward ways. That is good news for all who have strayed, even those for whom it is a long, long road back. With arms outstretched, God comes to meet us on our way.

The father not only met the son but celebrated his return with a feast for the whole village; that is the significance of killing the fatted calf – there is food for all. It was a joyful time. After a Sunday School lesson on this parable, a teacher asked the young class, “Was anyone sorry when the Prodigal Son returned?” ”Yes,” said one young lad, “the fatted calf.”[[2]](#endnote-2) The fatted calf was not alone. The older son too was sorry his no-good younger brother had returned. How easy it is for us to lose sight of him in this parable, for while the younger son had been busy making a public spectacle of himself, the older son had been quietly working for his father. He is the loyal one, the faithful one, yet also the unforgiving, judgmental, and resentful one who could not stomach a celebration for his brother’s return, and he refused to join the party. Can you blame him? The younger son wishes his father dead, embarrasses the family, runs away and makes a mess of his life, and upon his return is welcomed home with a party fit for a hero! Is he not justifiably angry!

Once again the father seeks out a son, this time the elder one, for he notices his absence from the party; he doesn’t wait for the older son to come to his senses and come in. The father goes to him. The same prodigal love that drove him out of his home to meet his son on the road drives the father to reach out to his elder son. In some ways, this son is as lost as his younger brother, for though he stayed home and labored for his father, he did not learn the gracious, loving, forgiving ways of his father. He believed that he alone had earned the father’s love, and he was unwilling to share that love with his father’s other son, the one he refused to call a brother. So he vented at his father, angrily refusing to address him with any title of respect. “Listen!” he says.

*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!*

His words drip with self-righteous anger. He who has always done his father’s bidding has been rewarded with nothing, while his no-good brother gets a feast at which he is the guest of honor! It is not just or fair. He will have no part in it and nothing to do with his father’s other son. Once again, the father does not get mad, but patiently urges his elder son to relent, reconcile with his brother, and join the party. The father loves both sons. He wants both to be happy in his house – as brothers. The lost son is found and that is worth celebrating as a family. Can the older son not see that?

How then does the parable end? Does the elder son return to the party and reconcile with his brother, or does he refuse his father’s request and remain outside the house? Does he reluctantly agree to enter the house and greet the guests but refuses to speak to his prodigal brother? Do the brothers ever reconcile, or is the older son’s relationship with his brother irrevocably broken and the relationship with his father forever strained? How does the parable end?

It ends with us as parables often do. We write the ending with our choices. God has prodigal love for all God’s sons and daughters – for unhappy, obedient sons and for wayward prodigal daughters looking for a way back home. God’s love is broad enough for all; God reaches out to us, embracing us in love and urging us to be reconciled to one another. Can you do that? Can you come to your senses and come home if you have wandered far away? Can you reach out with love to those lost prodigals among us and be reconciled with them? Can you love and forgive all those brothers and sisters who God loves and forgives? We are brothers and sisters in the family of God, and God wants us to live as one big, happy family in which finding the lost – and being found – offers great reason to celebrate together. So, come on in, and let the party begin! Amen

1. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant, and Through Peasant Eyes*, 1983, p.181 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. From *Illustrations Unlimited*, James S. Hewett, ed. quoted by John C. Peterson in the Center Presbyterian Church *Midweek Reminder*, January 15, 1997 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)