

“Home” GPPC 3-31-19  
Psalm 32, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The gospel reading this morning is often called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” Of course, prodigal is not a word we use much anymore. In fact, I looked it up, because I was ignorant about its exact meaning. It means to be wasteful or reckless. And there is that in the story—a prodigal son, a reckless, wasteful son. But many readers say the real emphasis of the story actually lies elsewhere, with the words and actions of someone else, the true center of the parable.

This is the third of three parables Jesus tells in a row. And all three parables are set in motion by a confrontation at the beginning of the chapter fifteen. “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus].”

As many of you know, tax collectors in the first century were despised. First of all they collected, well, they collected taxes (unsolicited reminder; it’s almost April 15<sup>th</sup>). Second, these tax collectors were sometimes Jews who worked for the occupying and hated Roman government. It would be like Russia taking over the U.S.

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and then installing some Guilford Park Presbyterian Church members to collect taxes from the rest of us, and to skim some of the tax money for themselves. There would be names for these people, but you couldn't say most of them in church.

And these tax collectors were coming near to listen to Jesus.

Along with them were what Luke calls *sinner*s. By sinners here, he probably doesn't mean ordinary sinners like you and me and your irritating neighbor with his loud music. By sinners, he means people of the time who make little attempt to follow the religious laws and conventions. If we were trying to imagine them today, I think we could use the term my pastor friend, Fran, uses. They are "hard living" people.

When I went through a divorce almost twenty years ago, I lived for several years on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of an apartment building near the shore of Lake Erie, just outside Cleveland, Ohio. It wasn't the worst place in the world, but it was a little beaten up and rough around the edges--like its occupants, including me.

I loved many of the people who lived there. I'd hang out with them at the pool, or we shout to each other from our little balconies. I loved

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these people, but many of them drank too much, smoked too much, and cussed too much. But who was I talk? Was I some paragon of virtue?

No. I was a sinner too. I *am* a sinner too.

The tax collectors and sinners are coming to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes, really some of the most faithful Presbyterians, um, I mean Jews, were complaining. “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Welcoming sinners was bad enough, but *eating* with them was the worst, because eating with someone in that culture meant you accepted that person, honored that person. It didn't mean you thought that everything he or she did was perfect. But it meant you accepted him or her. So there's Jesus eating with the worst of the worst—tax collectors and sinners who thought the ceiling of the church, um, I mean the synagogue, would fall in if they showed up for worship.

So the snippy grumbling of the Pharisees and the scribes is what prompts Jesus to tell three parables—the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and then the last one today—the parable of the prodigal son.

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A man has two sons, and the younger one asks for his share of the property that will come to him as an inheritance. Many scholars, (but not all) think this is an incredibly rude thing to ask, sort of like saying to the dad, “Gimme my share of the inheritance now, because you’re already dead to me.” But we hear no complaint from the father. He simply divides his property between the two sons; the younger, as is the custom, gets a third, and the elder, two-thirds.

And the younger son sets off for Hollywood or some other distant country. He blows his money on unspecified “dissolute living.” (And we’ll find out what that means at the end of the story.)

He’s “dissoluting” away. But then there’s a famine in the land, and he gets hungry. So he hires himself out to a pig farmer to feed the farmer’s pigs. This, of course, is a problem since he’s Jewish, and being around the pigs makes him ritually unclean. Things are going from bad to worse. And he’s so hungry he’d be happy to eat the carob pods that the pigs are chowing down on, but nobody gives him anything.

So Jesus says he comes to himself. Don’t you love the expression? He comes to himself. In his stubbornness and foolishness, he has

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actually separated from his true self to follow a false self. But now he comes to himself, comes to his senses at last and says to himself, “Geez. Even my father’s hired hands are ‘eating good in the neighborhood’ and here I am starving. I know what I’ll do. I’ll go to my father and say, ‘Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and before you; I’m no longer worthy to be called your son. Just treat me like one of your hired hands.’”

It’s a great speech—serious groveling and no excuses. Has this prodigal son had a moral awakening? Has he calculated the wages of sin, and decided that the price is too high to pay? Has he stared into the gloomy abyss, and realized that he instead wants to follow the light? Or is he just hungry and he knows where to get something to eat? We don’t know.

But is there really a difference? When we finally choose to repent of whatever destructive behavior or terrible thoughts or lousy words, some sin, aren’t we at last realizing that we are hungry, and we need to come home to the place where we are truly fed? It’s not that we’re such

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astute observers of our own human nature or such disciplined soldiers of the faith. It's that we're hungry.

So the prodigal son heads for home. It's been a typical story so far, hasn't it? Son who imagines he's a bigshot, blows off his father and family, heads for the bright lights of the big city, loses his moral compass, falls on his butt, and then heads for home with his tail between his legs. We've seen this story in a hundred movies. Heck, we may've lived this story.

But then the story begins taking strange turns. The prodigal son is heading for home, and we know what should await him there. One scholar says that his behavior has been so insulting to the father that most likely the neighbors would see him coming and then go out into the street to insult him or assault him. "You, no good..." (Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 181.) And then we expect him to make his way to the front door of the family home and give a trembling, timid knock at the door.

And, if he even bothers to answer the door, here's how the father answers, lips pursed, arms crossed, eyes blazing, "Boy! Get off my front

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porch! You made your bed! Now lie in it!” That’s what we expect. It makes sense and it seems just. And maybe in the movies, the father can be talked into taking his second-rate son back. Maybe. Maybe. That’s what we expect.

But Jesus tells a different story. He says the son sets off to return to his father. And while he’s still far off his father sees him. Why does the father see him from far off? Maybe because he has been looking for him, waiting for him all this time, his own heart breaking for his lost son. So the father sees him from far away, and then he does what fathers of the time, fathers with their flowing robes and their sober dignity, do not do. The father runs. He is filled with gut-wrenching compassion and he runs to his son, and sweeps him into a hug and kisses him.

And the son launches into his carefully prepared speech. “Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and before you, I’m no longer worthy to be called your son...” But the father interrupts the speech. He has the best robe, a ring for his fingers, and sandals for his feet brought for his son. He is welcomed home not as a hired hand but as family. And on top of it all, the father has the fatted calf, the one reserved for special occasions,

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one that would feed the whole village, killed. This is going to be some party!

This mercy, this over the top kindness and joy is not in the movie scripts, is it? But the next part of the story is.

The elder brother has been working in the field and hears the music and dancing, and he finds out that his brother has come home safe and sound. And he is ticked off, so ticked off he won't go into the party.

And once again, the father, with all his dignity, does the unthinkable. He goes out and pleads with his older son to come into the party, when everybody knows you don't treat your father that way. You treat your father with respect. But, oh no. In fact, the older son doubles down on the disrespect. "Listen!" he says, as if speaking to a misbehaving child and not his father. "Listen! All these years I've been working like a slave for you. I've never disobeyed your command. And you've never even given me a little goat so that I could have a party with my friends. But when this son of yours (he refuses to call him his brother). When this son of yours comes back after devouring your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

We've seen this movie before, haven't we? The older son views his relationship with his father as a business proposition, not a love relationship. His father *owes* him something, something more than what he has received. And the older son views his messy younger brother as a competitor, not as a beloved sibling who has made some terrible mistakes. In the process, the elder son is just as wrong as the younger son has been.

But the father, the true center of the story, has the last word. "Son, you're always with me, and all that's mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours (the father will not accept the disowning of his brother), because this brother of yours was dead, and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

So the story ends with the father's reminder to the older brother and to us that there are worse things than being dead. It's possible technically to be alive, but truthfully to be lost, to have no clue about the purpose and meaning of life, to imagine there's nothing better than self-centered, wasteful, foolish, "dissolute living." That's why the climax of

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the father's speech is not "dead but has come to life." No. It's "he was lost and has been found."

The story ends with a tension. The younger son has come to himself, confessed his sins, and come home to a party. "He was lost and has been found." But the older son, the industrious one, the responsible one stands outside the party, demanding his rights, insisting on his wages, whining about the unmerited love his brother has received, instead of coming inside for the celebration of his father's unmerited love not only for his brother but for him too. Will he go in to the party? We don't know. We don't know. The story is open-ended.

And our story is open-ended too. Some of us (maybe all of us at some point) are that younger brother. We're going to live our life the way we want, as thoughtlessly, as wastefully, as selfishly as we want. Who cares what God might want us to do? Nobody can tell us what to do. Not even God.

But then one day, we hope, we come to ourselves, we come to our senses, and realize that we are hungry. And the thoughts, words, and deeds we have gorged on are not actually satisfying us, because they

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have no spiritual calories. And so we head for home. We confess our mistakes to God. And miracle of miracles, God welcomes us home with a hug, a kiss, new duds, and a party to end all parties.

And some of us, (maybe all of us at some point), are the elder brother. We're so well-behaved, so diligent in our Christian discipleship, so deserving of God's love and the admiration of others. We've earned it. Why doesn't everybody see it? Yet other people, less deserving people, are catching all the breaks, getting the recognition, and, it even appears that God might love them as much as God loves us. It's so unfair.

But then one day, we hope, we finally see and understand the truth of God's love for everybody, for hard living people and for proud people who think God owes them something, for those who think church is stupid and worship a waste of time, and for people who are here every time the doors are open. God loves them all. And there's this party going on. There's this party going on like you can't believe—music and dancing and food. Will we go in? Will we truly come home? Will we?

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