



St. Mary's Episcopal Church

March 27, 2022

Lent 4, Year C

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Message by Rev. Michael Burke

The Prodigal Son. Today's passage from Luke's Gospel is one of the most recognizable of all the parables in Scripture. We've likely heard many sermons in which we have been invited to "find ourselves in the story."

And of course, the name we give to the story (what we call it.) might have something to do with where we locate ourselves *within* the story.¹

If it's "*the story of the prodigal son*," then perhaps we identify with the younger son, who goes away, far away, to some place where no one recognizes him, where he's not "his father's son", no one knows his family, some place where he can be centered on himself without restraint. The boy has never handled so much money before. He spends and spends and spends, and has nothing to show for it in the end. Nothing. As he runs through his bankroll, the economy crashes. Now he has no cash and no connections. He's just another poor face on the street. Jobs are hard to find, he discovers. He ends up with this terrible place slopping the hogs.

Perhaps there has been a time in your life when you hit bottom like this son. Or perhaps you know someone who has, in some part of their life. Or perhaps that time is now... perhaps it's no accident that you're here at this time hearing this story... I wonder if there might be a time and place within us, where we are, or have been... slopping the hogs, so to speak. I wonder what we might know of such a desperate place. Anxiety, fear, and loneliness press upon us mercilessly. Perhaps at night, we lie awake too long, wondering how our lives fell off course. Some part of us feels disconnected from ourselves, as if we don't really know who we are, and so we become sick, or emotionally distraught... Or we become cynical, wandering in search of a hope we both avoid and would disavow if it

¹ Based in very large part upon the work of *The Very Rev. Charles Hoffacker*, one time rector of *St. Paul's Church, Port Huron, MI*, and dean of the *Blue Water Convocation in Eastern Michigan*.

found us. In the words of the story today, we remain outside the feast of forgiveness. We forget that we have a home that can be, even for us, a place of healing.

One day the younger son wakes up, a little at least. He decides to return home, get a job from his old man. He feels that he's not a son any more, but guesses correctly that the family farm is still prosperous. There will be three square meals a day. First: he admits he has a problem; and overcomes his pride enough to admit it to himself and to God. And so he has a change of heart, a slow turning, and he heads again for home...

But maybe this isn't, for you, the story of the prodigal son at all. Maybe it's the *Parable of the Loving Parent*. Back home, the old man often walks out on the porch and scans the horizon for some sign of his lost son. Every day he looks for him, a part of himself that has gone missing. Although sorrow has etched lines of age into his face, he does not give up on hope.

Maybe there is someone, or something, that you have long waited for. Perhaps there is a relationship lost to you that still brings on a sense of yearning, longing, and regret whenever you think of it. Perhaps there is some lost part of yourself that is yet to find itself, or to be found.

One day the father sees a familiar figure far off. His heart leaps! It's his son! He doesn't know why the boy is back--maybe he wants more money. The father doesn't care. All he knows is that his son is back. His doctor would not approve, but this old man goes running, running down the road to welcome home his son.

The boy begins to stammer out his carefully crafted confession: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you . . ." The old man proceeds right past what his son says. He yells over his shoulder: "Start fixing dinner: roast the calf we've been fattening, bring out the drink! My son's not dead; he's alive! He's not lost; he's been found!"

Now... **Notice what doesn't happen.** There's no lecture about how irresponsible the son has been. There's no suggestion that he go inside and apologize to his mother. There's no demand for an accounting of where the money went. What we do surmise is that there is welcome, and gift giving, and celebration, and music and dancing long into the night.

Will this boy go into the feast of celebration, of forgiveness, of healing? Or will he remain outside, overwhelmed by shame... .. overwhelmed by the feelings of his unworthiness, as though he were still in the pigsty?

You know yourself – what would you do?

This younger son still lives in the experience of a lot of us. Inside somewhere, we can feel as if there is an irresponsible part of ourselves, a place where we keep pace with our selfishness and arrogance, where we run from love, where we must hit bottom and land hard before opening our hearts anew and learning a painful but ultimately promising lesson. That younger son travels home in sorrow, yet finds an unexpected welcome.

But here now, as in every moment of our lives, is a crucial decision point: *Will we go in to the feast of forgiveness, or will we stay outside?*

(pause)

But wait. Maybe, for you, this parable is *The Parable of the Responsible Older Brother*. If you are the responsible one in a family of irresponsible siblings, this telling might be for you. The elder brother has his own way of remaining outside. Mark Twain describes him perfectly as "a good man in the worst sense of the word." He's upstanding, a hard worker, respected by others, fit to inherit the farm, but he's also a reservoir of half-realized resentment.

This very day, the elder son comes home after a long, hard day to find the house unexpectedly alive. This makes the elder son cautious. He likes things predictable and for things to have a certain order about them.

Still outside, he finds out from a farmhand that the party is for his brother. First thought: he can't believe the scoundrel's back! And HE, the elder brother is being usurped and ignored! Year in and year out, he, the older brother has been here keeping things going, and all of a sudden, everything is changed just because his undeserving brother has decided to finally show his face. The elder son's weariness turns to jealous rage. He remains outside, unable to go in, seething inside himself with powerfully resentful thoughts about his brother and father.

The old man, now anxious again, sets down his glass and goes outside to his angry elder son. The boy runs from him, and for the second time that day, the old man jogs down the

road. Breathless, he confronts his elder son. This boy lets his father have it with a truckload of resentments.

Finally, the father gets a word in edgewise. The truth is, he loves both his sons. To welcome the wastrel might arguably be a loss in some sense for the elder: but moreover it means the elder brother has gained his sibling back.

Now, stop for a moment to grab hold of this thought: The elder brother has also fled from his father. And he has not just down the road! For years he has been the recipient of his father's kindness. For years he has called his Father's house his own... And... somehow... a false, hard image of a demanding father has held sway over him, and made life miserable for those around him, although perhaps he has seldom been aware of this. All the elder brother can think right now is "do my faithfulness and responsibility for all these years count for anything?"

The real father tries to shatter this illusion. He wants his older son to return home, too.

Now, have you noticed something? At this point in the story, all three characters are *outside of the house*. **The younger brother**, who in my imagining *still* is caught up in shame and isn't sure that he is *really* worthy to enter again, as a son, the house of his parents. If he did, then I'm guessing that he followed his father back outside upon the arrival of his older brother. (I have a lot of siblings, so I know how these things work...) **The older brother** is outside, because he is furious and simply refuses to go in and be part of this travesty of justice. And of course, the father is outside again, pleading with them both.

Here is where the biblical parable ends and the real story begins.

Have you ever noticed that the parable ends right here, just as things are getting interesting? It's like a season cliff-hanger on Netflix or Peacock. Does the Elder brother storm off? Does the younger son, finding no welcome from his sibling, continue on in his journey? Seeing the divisions in the family come to a head, and being unsuccessful in his plea to each of the brothers, does the father's heart break right there, for the final time?

Does anyone ever go back inside again?

Isn't it interesting that preachers everywhere, and perhaps we ourselves, complete the story, imagining that everyone finds forgiveness, everyone returns to their best selves, and all go inside and sit down for a celebratory meal?

Why do we complete the story with such a transformative ending even when the biblical account does not, but leaves us hanging? Maybe it's because we all want a happy Hollywood ending, somewhere in our world. Or maybe it's because we realize that in Luke's Gospel, this story is the third in a three-part cycle of redemption stories. First there is the Parable of the Lost Sheep, then there is the Parable of the Lost Coin. In each previous parable, redemption happens. The lost sheep is found and returned to the flock again. The lost coin is discovered and the family celebrates.

But here, in THIS parable, the ending is still to be written.

And it gets written by us, in the remainder of our lives.

So let me leave you with this thought:

Maybe the story is NOT the **Parable of the Prodigal Son**. And maybe the story is not the **Parable of the Responsible Brother**. And maybe it's not even the **Parable of the Loving Parent**.

Maybe it's the story of Prodigal Grace. God's Grace. In the eyes of the world this kind of Grace seems wasteful – poured out on the unworthy and the resentful alike. Rather than a fair measure of merit, God's Grace is also prodigal – It is extravagant, lavish, illogical,² The parable disrupts our usual sense of things and expands our understanding of Grace itself. Once again, we learn that Grace is not earned, but given freely as a gift – a gift that is meant to keep exchanging hands.

Somehow, we intuit something of this kind of transformative, prodigal Grace. Somehow, somewhere, deep inside, there must be a still small voice – a whisper that gives us knowledge of that kind of grace, that kind of ending.

Because, in our understanding of the biblical story for today, I bet none of us finish out the telling by having the younger son, the older brother, and the father left standing

² Based on the material from Sanctified Art, prepared for Lent 2022. www.sanctifiedart.org

outside in the rain (No, there's no rain in the story either – I just added that because it felt like a nice touch. If this was a country song, it would definitely begin to rain).

So the challenge is for us to complete the parable, not in the biblical text, but in our lives... How do we choose to finish the story? Can we really trust in Prodigal Grace?

In the first writing of this sermon, I ended it by saying, "Prodigal Grace, God's lavish, illogical, unmerited Love waits for us right inside, with a room of celebration and a feast of abundance and healing. *Will we go in?*"

Well, I woke up this morning realizing that was not how the sermon ends. And I sat down and I wrote a final line. The sermon ends like this:

Grace gets up from the celebratory table, comes outside to find us, and then... the brother, and the other brother, and the father, and us, hand in hand... ... we all walk back inside together.

The end? We'll be back with new episodes next season.

Scriptures for Today:

The Collect

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament - Joshua 5:9-12

The Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

The Psalm - Psalm 32

1 Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, *
and whose sin is put away!

2 Happy are they to whom the Lord imputes no guilt, *
and in whose spirit there is no guile!

3 While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, *
because of my groaning all day long.

4 For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; *
my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer.

5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you, *
and did not conceal my guilt.

6 I said, " I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." *
Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.

7 Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of trouble; *
when the great waters overflow, they shall not reach them.

8 You are my hiding-place;
you preserve me from trouble; *
you surround me with shouts of deliverance.

9 "I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; *
I will guide you with my eye.

10 Do not be like horse or mule, which have no understanding; *
who must be fitted with bit and bridle,
or else they will not stay near you."

11 Great are the tribulations of the wicked; *
but mercy embraces those who trust in the Lord.

12 Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord; *
shout for joy, all who are true of heart.

The Epistle - 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

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

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."

So Jesus told them this parable:

"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. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But 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! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So 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. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But 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. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came 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!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But 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.'"