

Sermon on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2010  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

There are some who say “*life imitates art.*” Today I’d like to suggest that oftentimes “*life imitates scripture.*” Or to put it another way, often what happens in our lives today is very similar to what happened to people portrayed in the holy scriptures a long time ago. Just as the writers of scripture drew meaning from those experiences, and offered lessons as to who God is and how God acts to guide us in our lives, we, too, can draw meaning from the scriptures as they relate to our experiences as well. Take, for example, the well-known and beloved parable that we read today from the gospel: *The Parable of the Man with Two Sons.*

We sometimes call it the parable of the *Prodigal Son.* We know it well – a man has two sons. One of them, the younger one, wants his inheritance early, before his father dies, because he is anxious to leave home and seek his fortune in another, far-off city. Reluctantly, the father relents, and gives his younger son his share of the inheritance, and waves goodbye as his son leaves. However, the younger son finds that he has bit off far more than he could chew. His inexperience and youth lead him to spend his money wastefully, and soon he is broke and has to take a job. With no real work experience or gifts, he is forced to work as a hired hand, feeding the pigs, and has no place to sleep except with the animals. Finding himself starving to death and poor, he realizes that he has made a big mistake. In order to survive he has to come home. Swallowing his pride, he returns home to his father, expecting the worst, ready to work as a field hand in his father’s fields. Much to his surprise, his father sees him coming, runs out to meet him, and welcomes him with a warm embrace. Then he calls forth his servants to make a feast so that they might celebrate his son’s return with a welcome home party. Meanwhile, the older son watches from afar. He burns with anger, because he stayed home, dutifully working in the field, and resents his father’s welcome of his stupid, spoiled brother. His father begs him to come to the party, because his lost son has returned home. But he refuses, preferring to stay out in the field by himself in righteous indignation. We don’t know if he ever reconciles with him.

There is someone for everybody to relate to in this parable, if you are able to cross the “gender divide”, and see yourself in the father, or either of the two sons. It could just as well be a mother and her two daughters. There are additional cultural meanings in this story from scripture, especially in ancient customs around inheritance and sonship. But let’s just say this story can work for us whether you are male or female. Just imagine!....

Can you see yourself in the younger son or daughter, when you were young, seeking your way in the world. When you were an adolescent, did you ever want to be free of your parent's control, even if they were really nice, and really cool? It's natural for each of us at some point in our lives to want to be free, our own person, with our own place, and seek our own fortune (and not just be known as our mother or father's kid). I can relate to that. And did you ever strike out on your own, and find that things weren't as easy as you thought? Did you ever fail at anything, like school, a job, or a marriage? Maybe you flunked out of your first semester in college, and realized that academics weren't for you. Maybe you were laid off from your job, or failed somehow in the work you were assigned to do and lost it to someone else. Maybe you went off to live with someone else, but then broke up....or got married too soon, against your parents' advice, and then found yourself in a terrible relationship and had to get out, separate, and divorce. Maybe you have had to move back home as an adult, and live in your parents' basement, when you thought that you had already struck out on your own – but merely “struck out!” It happens a lot these days, each one of these situations!

And can any of you relate to being the father, or the mother, of these two sons or daughters, making their bad decisions, having to hold your tongue and wait to see what happened? Have you ever watched your son or daughter get involved in a bad relationship, get serious too soon and get married too young, live beyond their means and go way into debt, but you couldn't say a thing? Did you ever have to wait patiently for an adult child to come to their senses, and hope and pray that they wouldn't die before they changed their behavior? Have you ever wished that your son or daughter didn't resent you just because you wanted the best for them? And have you ever felt the joy of experiencing the love of your children, especially your adult children, when they return home after leaving in anger?

Finally, do any of you relate to the elder son, who stayed home and worked faithfully for his father, never giving a bit of trouble? Can you relate to his devotion to duty, and loyalty to his parents? Have you ever been “mad as hell” at a younger (or older) sibling who makes some big mistake and gets away with it, because you think your parents are showing favoritism, and letting them get off “scot free”? You're not the only one! In fact, many of us here can relate to any of these characters in the parable, and when we look back at the end of our lives, we can probably relate at some point to all three of them! That's why this parable is so well know and loved. Because it strikes so true to each one of us.

Some of you know that every week I meet with a small group of other Lutheran pastors in St. Paul on Thursday mornings to study the scripture lessons for the coming week and share our thoughts about them. We do this to help prepare for preaching on Sunday mornings, but also to help us get to know each other better, to go deeper into exploring our lives of faith. Sometimes we share

very personal things about ourselves with each other, like a death in the family, a loved ones illness, our own fears and struggles, doubts or frustrations. It's a good thing for every human being, clergy or lay person, to have such a supportive group of peers to meet with regularly.

Well, last week one of my colleagues shared with us what he and his wife are going through with their children, which relates a lot to the parable we have been studying. He and his wife adopted their son and their daughter a number of years ago. They are both young adults at this time, of college age. After they adopted their children they later went through episodes of anger or depression, and issues of identity, due to having been adopted, not biological children of their parents. It happens. But the son seems to have had more issues than his sister. He often ran away to spend nights, weekends, or even weeks with friends or acquaintances. He got involved with drugs and alcohol. He went through chemical dependency treatment as a teenager, and they underwent a lot of counseling as a family. Their daughter was well-adjusted and a good student, but she had to participate in family counseling sessions also, because of her brother's many issues. Last week my friend told us that their son has been gone for at least six months. He has dropped out of school, they don't know where he is living (he's probably in some other state somewhere), and they think he is using again.

So, they are waiting, like the prodigal son's father, waiting for word from their son and wondering if he will ever return home. They have given so much love to him, and now he is still lost. They can very much relate to the waiting father in the story, while his son was in some far-off country, without a word. They can only dream about a joyful reunion...the possibility now seems so remote and unimaginable. Perhaps they will never see him again alive and well, but they hope that they will. They have faith that they will, and pray for his return.

In the meantime, their daughter is still doing well in school, and will graduate from college this year. She is furious at the many mistakes her brother has made, when he has had so many opportunities in life, as well as loving parents who keep reaching out to him. She thinks it is totally unfair that he has had so many second chances, keeps blowing it, and still gets so much attention and love. She's probably right...but she doesn't see it from her parents' perspective. So everyone in the family now is in the process of waiting for what will happen next, what will the brother do...how long must the parents wait...how long must their daughter remain angry? So at their church today they are lighting candles in worship, everyone who is waiting for a son or daughter to return home, everyone who has an unresolved relationship, or a loved one who needs to come to grips with an issue or addiction in their life.

So I am lighting this candle now for all those parents who wait for their children, for spouses who wait for a husband or wife to come to their senses, for

everyone who waits for a loved one in crisis. It is a candle lit with the light of faith and hope in the God who loves us so much that he waits for us, through all our mistakes and rejection of his love, who longs to welcome you and me home like a father or mother welcomes their long-lost, beloved children. For this is truly the heart of the matter. You and I have so many times walked out on God, our creator and our loving parent, who longs to see you and me come back home, so that he can forgive every single lie we have told, every denial of his love, and every mistake we have made that has caused so much harm to ourselves and each other. Because our loving heavenly Father's greatest desire is to welcome us home with a great big party, a celebration of joy at the reconciliation of all God's estranged children! So I love the title suggested for a sermon on this parable, which is: *"Forgiveness; with music and dancing!"* I love that title, because that is exactly what God is offering you and me today. So let's thank God, and gather at our Lord's table for bread and wine together, to reconcile with one another and with God all our petty differences, because we are all children in one family of faith.

And then let's go downstairs of some more food and fellowship, to celebrate the fact that though we may all have once been lost, we are now all found. We were once blind, but now we see! Thanks be to God for his great gift of grace!