

Sermon on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 6, 2016  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

I have been trying to think of a title for the sermon today. I don't often create titles – it seems kind of presumptuous, or limiting to a sermon, which is always a work in progress. But because this story has such a famous title *The Parable of the Prodigal Son* it might be a useful exercise. Because calling this “The Prodigal Son” seems to misplace the focus Jesus had in telling it. Besides – the term “prodigal” wasn't even used by Jesus – that came later. But there are several songs called “The Prodigal Son” – one written by the Reverend Robert Wilkins, covered by the Rolling Stones in 1968 on their *Beggars Banquet* album. It's a really rockin' blues number! (Thank God for Google!)

Some don't think this parable is about the wayward son at all – some think it's about the father, and both his sons, and a story about the relationship of God with us – how far God will go to receive us back, no matter how far away we run. So, there have been other titles for this parable. Theologian Helmut Thielecke called it “The Waiting Father”. David Lose, president of Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia, calls it the parable of “The Prodigal God” – because the word “prodigal” actually means extravagant or lavish beyond belief, not sinful or wasteful, and here we see how extravagant beyond belief God's love is for us. It has been called by some “The Lost Son”, or “The Two Lost Sons”, or “The Lost Sons and the Welcoming Father”. Luther Seminary professor Caroline Lewis calls it “The Story of the Really Ticked Off Older Brother” – which means what this parable is about really depends on your perspective!

How do *you* hear this story? Who do you relate to? Traditionally, we assume that people relate to the lost, wayward son who took his father's inheritance money and ran off to sow his wild oats in a faraway land – because that's the “sexy” version. He had a lot to be ashamed of, but his father still welcomed him home. Slave trader John Newton identified with this – when he realized how terrible his sin was in making money transporting human beings from Africa to sell as slaves in America, he wrote the words to the beloved hymn *Amazing Grace – how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me*.

But it is very possible to approach the story from other directions. I have already mentioned how you can focus on the character of the father, who let his son go (along with his inheritance) and foolishly waste it on lavish living, then welcomed him back with a great celebration. Why? Because he loved him.

But do any of you identify with the elder brother? The brother who was so angry with his father for welcoming his lost brother back home, that he stayed out

in the field, sulking and bitterly tending the crops, and refused to come to the party? If we're honest, maybe that's who many of us identify with, especially if we have been "responsible" in our lives, doing our duty to God, family, and country. We don't understand how our sinful younger siblings can get off so "scot free" – not even a reprimand from the old man! It's just not fair! Whatever happened to "tough love"? (It makes you wonder, that maybe the dad should have asked his older son that if he had only known how easy it was to come back, that he could have just gone off himself to "live it up" and have some fun for once?) I don't know, but the older brother sure felt "superior" to that wayward youth who came home in shame, only to be welcomed home. And that's what made him so mad. And so, there is often part of us that feels resentful over those who have left, or never bothered with the church, and show up much later, but are welcomed and received warmly – when *they should have known better!* Maybe should pay a bit of a price for that welcome! Because it's not fair – and we don't rest our hopes on *grace* nearly as much as we rest them on what is *fair!* (To be sure, most people don't even know what grace is, especially when they haven't knowingly experienced it, but everyone – the smallest child – knows what *fair* is!

For some of us in the Church, this depending more on what is "fair" rather than on "grace" is most certainly true – even when we're Lutherans, and we should know better! We say we are *saved by grace* but we really talk more about what is *fair*. We know exactly what is not "fair" in our life's experience ("it's not fair that I'm not paid better, or didn't get that job, or that I'm not appreciated like I should be"), but if and when something good happens, it's our "just reward" and seldom recognized as "grace"! And isn't there a saying that goes *life isn't fair?* We tell that to other people when they are disappointed by life's hard knocks, but it never works for us! Life ain't fair – isn't that the truth? That's the older brother in us.

So we might complain just a little bit when we think of how faithful we have been, worshiping faithfully over the years at Redeemer, staying here in the central city, in a neighborhood called Rondo, even when other people we know are enjoying life beyond their means in that far country called "the suburbs". When we see their church's grow in numbers and wealth, while our numbers decline and we find more things needing repair in our building – we think it's *not fair!* We have been faithful and responsible to our calling to our mission in the city, so we should be more appreciated – right? Where's the party God holds for us? Well? Once again, it all depends on your perspective! To a congregation trying to get started without a building, worshiping in a storefront, what we have looks pretty darned good! It's a great treasure we have, without realizing it.

And when we Lutherans commiserate about our declining numbers and prestige, and begin to grumble that "the church isn't what it used to be", we should remind ourselves of our baptism, that *we have already received* the ring, the robe,

and the fatted calf. For we are baptized, we are called children of God, and we have received the sign of the cross in water or in oil traced on our foreheads, a sign that God's love for us lasts forever! Actually, we all are the treasure – not this building!

So I'm beginning to think that in this parable we see the ongoing tension of what is going on inside us all the time, as we see ourselves sometimes in ALL of the characters! Sometimes we feel like the younger son, who wants to get on with life and not be held down, to take our inheritance and experience life as we hope it will be. Then, find out that it's not one big party of fun and games, and we are ashamed, as we disappoint ourselves and those we love, and have to swallow our pride and come back home, seeking forgiveness. Can you identify with the moment when the younger son "comes to himself", and realizes what he has done, and how far he has fallen? It's called growing up, and discovering what you have done, and deciding to take responsibility, and own up to it. This can be a great lesson in humility – and I hope that each one of you has that experience, and follows through with repentance to God and to other human beings – I have! – for there is nothing like receiving forgiveness, and coming back home to God.

But in the story we also see the resentment that is possible within us when we see somebody else receive that forgiveness and grace – we think, undeserved! That side of us is just as "lost" as that infamous "prodigal" son! Have you ever been so steeped in responsibility and your own sense of "worthiness" that you can't see the need for empathy and grace for another person? I think this happens most often in religion and in politics – we see it all the time in political debates and hear it in stump speeches during campaigns, but we also hear it in church kitchens, at coffee, and even from church pulpits on Sunday mornings sometimes! That's when we *blame others* for falling short, and fail to see in ourselves similar failings. It's when we complain about the speck in our neighbor's eye, and don't see the log in our own (a little saying that Jesus was fond of using with his disciples!). Sometimes we get a little *self-righteous* in church, when we think or talk about those who "just don't get it" – like we do. When we talk about it, that's when it is called *gossip*. And we've all done it – because we enjoy it so much! Come on, admit it – it's *fun* to talk about other people – that's why we do it. But just remember, it hurts like hell when somebody else talks about you. So we had better come to our senses, just like the father in the story advised his oldest son, and come to the party for our little brothers (or sisters) when they mess up, and fess up! Because when we refuse to receive them, out of stubborn pride, we mess up – and need to fess up ourselves!

So, Jesus offers us all a new model in that welcoming father in the story, who waited so patiently for his son to come to his senses and come home. It's possible that he might never have come home, which was a realistic worry. The

boy could have starved to death, or been killed. He was totally out of his element. But when he did come home, his father's joy was genuine and great (uncalled for and excessive, his older son would say). This is the joy that Jesus invites us to have in our welcome to others – not begrudging, or with reservations – a “welcome with a price tag attached”! You and I are invited by our Lord to receive one another joyfully and with genuine love, as you would for a long lost child returning home.

For this is how our Lord Jesus receives you and me, whenever we come to him, with open arms and a warm and loving embrace. In fact, our Lord has even run down the road to receive us – like that welcoming father – when Jesus came to this earth to preach and teach and show us the way to live. When our Lord died on that cross, he opened his arms in vulnerability to receive the worst suffering and humiliation that we humans could imagine to dish out. But these outstretched arms were the greatest sign of love that God could imagine to give us, as Jesus suffered and died. And then, on the third day, God raised Jesus from the dead, and shows us the power that love and life have over sin and death.

So today you and I are invited to come to our senses, and come home to Jesus – to come onto him and rest, to find forgiveness, safety, and love in God's loving embrace. We are all invited to come and join the party for everyone who has come home, and to dine at that great banquet to which the whole world has been invited to feast! And we are the ones being sent out into the world to bring the invitation! Yes, *you!* Don't play it safe, don't play it cool, don't be shy and don't begrudge your neighbor the invitation, because each and every child of God has been invited to this banquet! Thanks be to God, for this invitation which you and I and the whole human race has received, and for the indescribable celebration which follows when you and I and all those children beloved by God come home! So let's all just get along.....and join the party! Amen!