

**Reconciled**  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

*Fourth Sunday of Lent/ 27<sup>th</sup> March 2022*

Parables pack a punch. They generate an experience, touch us deeply, hit us *in the gut*, and knock us off our feet. Parables make us think. They force us to wrestle. They give us headaches and mess with the way we view the world. They are intentionally disorienting, which is probably why we want to turn them into morality tales. But then they wouldn't shock, and they're meant to shock—to wake us up and show us something new. Parables are teachings tools and Jesus was a master of them.

As we approach this parable, we must be very careful that we don't turn it (and every parable) into a morality tale. Did you notice that Jesus never said we shouldn't be like the younger son, the one who squanders his inheritance? Jesus neither commends nor condemns him. And Jesus never said we ought to be like the obedient older son—the one who ends up bitter for always being the obedient one. (And, if you're the eldest child in your family, like me, you can probably relate to his protests). You see, this is not an "example story"—don't be like the younger one, be like the older one. No, it's a *parable*—designed to wake us up.

Therefore, it's unfortunate that this text is known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son for at least three reasons. First, the title turns all our attention toward the younger son, making it difficult to see what the parable is about. Second, the word *prodigal* is never used in the parable—or anywhere else in the Bible. Third, because the word *prodigal* is used to describe the younger son and because the younger came to realize that he did something foolish by squandering his inheritance, we've come to associate prodigal with something bad.

Look up the word *prodigal* in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, and you'll find the following definitions: "carelessly and foolishly spending money, time, etc." It could also be defined as "characterized by profuse or wasteful expenditure" or "recklessly spendthrift." These are all negative associations. However, there is a third, more positive meaning of the word, and it's this: "yielding abundantly."

"Prodigal," from the Latin *prodigus*, had only one meaning: *lavish*. I guess *lavish* could have either positive or negative associations. It depends upon how you feel when you're around excess or abundance or large amounts of something. How do you feel when you're the object of another's excess or abundance or generosity? How do you feel when something is lavished upon you? Does it make you feel uncomfortable, or can you receive it with gratitude?

Only the negative meanings with the word *prodigal* are associated with the younger son, never the positive one. It would be interesting to chart the history of the word *prodigal*, how it's used. I wonder if a particular reading of this parable over centuries has shaped our definition of this word. It's probably why most consider being prodigal as something wrong or to be avoided.

But what if the parable's focus is not really about the sons? What if we turn our attention away from the sons toward the *father*? What do we see? We discover that the father is benevolent and full of grace, a father waiting for the son to return home, who saw him when he was "still far off," as the text says, which means the father was looking for him. When the father saw him, he was "filled with compassion" (Luke 15:20). Without even asking his son to explain himself or ask forgiveness the father, we're told, had "compassion"—compassion, *first*. Then the father ran and put his arms around him, engulfed him with that compassion, and kissed him. The son tries to confess and apologize, but it's as if the father doesn't even hear him. He seems to ignore the confession, cuts his son off mid-sentence, and says to the servant, "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 came to life; he was lost and has been found. And they began to celebrate" (Luke 15:22-23).

Maybe this parable is not about the sons but maybe it's really about the father, as a metaphor for God. Now, I know, it's painfully obvious that we are missing the mother in this family tale. Perhaps the mother is at work behind the scenes telling the father what to do? What we do have is a father who takes on the role of the mother, who welcomes the younger son back into the family, back into the fold, and feeds him.

In each of the parables in Luke 15, we have stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. And in each one, Jesus works to reframe, enlarge, and expand our God-image. Jesus wants us to know what he knows about *God*—the God who seeks and saves the lost and welcomes us home. And so, if we're going to continue to associate the word *prodigal* with this parable, shouldn't it be used to describe what *God* is like. For God is *prodigal*—the one who lavishes upon us grace upon grace!

It's this grace that allows for reconciliation to take place. A broken relationship is healed. That which was formerly far off and apart, alienated, has been brought near, brought close. Paul put it this way to the Corinthians, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Cor. 5:19). Paul knew as a sinner, personally, what reconciliation with God was like. And Paul called the church of Christ to engage in that same work as agents of reconciliation. Last Friday was Flannery O'Connor's (1925-1964) birthday. She knew the power of grace and she knew how much we resist grace. In a letter from August 9, 1955, she wrote, "The operation of the Church is entirely set up for the sinner; which creates much misunderstanding among the smug." I think of the eldest son here.

Jesus showed us what God is like. Reconciliation has always been in the heart of God—whether we know it or not. It didn't first appear after the cross. There is forgiveness; there is mercy, there is compassion before Jesus gets to Calvary. God didn't become forgiving on Easter Sunday. Jesus' entire life and ministry and his death and resurrection were all about reconciliation. That's why it's essential to remember the Incarnation as we walk through Lent and approach Holy Week. That's why it's appropriate to sing Christmas carols in Lent, to

connect Easter with Christmas, because it allows us to remember, to see, to embody with our lives that reconciliation is what the Christian life is all about, reconciliation is possible and real—between God and humanity, with one another, with ourselves—and that we break the heart of God every time we forget this. That’s why we sang Charles Wesley’s (1707-1788) carol, “Hark! The herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn king. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!’”

One of the wisest philosophical minds of the last century got right to the heart of the gospel, to the heart of Paul, to the heart of the human condition. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) said, “Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean a theory about what has happened or will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life.”<sup>1</sup> And that something is reconciliation, transformation, redemption, salvation, being born again—call it what you will. It all speaks to the healing of the human heart that every heart is crying out for once we, like the older son, “come to ourselves” (Lk. 15:17). It’s about God making people whole.

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) once told a story to illustrate the popularity of the Spanish name Paco. He also illustrated something else, perhaps unintentionally. I love this story. And think of it every time I preach on this parable. Hemingway tells us: “A father journeyed to Madrid to put an ad in the local paper that read: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON WEDNESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA. The next day the authorities had to muster a squadron of the Civilian Guard to disperse the mob of 800 young men who massed on the street in front of the inn.”<sup>2</sup>

We’re all Pacos, hungry for forgiveness, hungry to be reconciled to God, others, the past, and ourselves, hungry for that welcome. Peace with God and with others and ourselves. This is the ministry entrusted to the church. *This* is why we exist. It’s the only reason we exist. To be prodigal with grace. If this has been your experience, you’re called to be its witness; you’re called to be its servant, wherever you live and work. Restoring broken fellowship wherever you find it, restoring broken communities. And when this happens we witness the presence of Christ with us. Into a world such as ours, with our eyes full of tears, we see the ruin of broken lives strewn everywhere, especially in war and terror, brutality and violence—still, it’s to *this* world, we have been entrusted with this message of hope and reconciliation. This is what we are called to do. We celebrate it, throw a lavish party, every time the dead come to life and the lost are found.



*Return of the Prodigal Son* by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669).

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<sup>1</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (1977), cited in Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 182.

<sup>2</sup>Cited in Donald W. McCullough, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1995), 100.