

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Sermon Reflection Notes

The story of Luke 15:11b to 32 is easily the most familiar of all Jesus' parables. It is not a story with a single point, but rather, it has many facets; it is a compressed 'slice of life.' We know it as the "prodigal son" parable, and it contains what most of Jesus' parables contain: stories about redemption and making beautiful things out of chaos and hurt.

The story begins with the usual suspects (Pharisees and scribes) complaining about how Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. Jesus overhears them and owns it; *of course* he hangs out with 'those' people. Jesus then tells the famous parable of the younger son, returning home after living a licentious, scandalous life and wasting his inheritance that he had the audacity to ask for before his father even died. He insulted his father by taking his inheritance early, insulted his religion by selling the family land, insulting the family name by squandering all he had. And then, because he's out of options and desperately hungry, he returns home.

He has rehearsed his 'apology' speech and is ready to grovel and beg for a place among the servants, but instead, his father runs to greet the returning wayward son and throws a party to celebrate his return. Everyone is there to join the festivities...except the elder son. The faithful one, who never left his father's side. The elder son finds out what's going on from one of the father's slaves and is indignant. He rails at his father, outraged that he has been doing all the work and stayed with the father, and he's never even had a small party in his honor. He's miffed, and we often think, rightfully so. The father doesn't chastise the older brother or berate the younger one. Instead, he calmly says: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

Pastor Ron suggested that he hears in those words this message: there's more than enough. You will never want for anything. You've never left my side, but my wayward son has returned, and while it may be undignified, we will celebrate.

It's not merely the younger son who is a prodigal though. The definition of prodigal is: 'spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant.' Of course that is the younger son; but is the elder son not reckless with his own sense of entitlement? Is the father not lavishly, recklessly irresponsible with his love and mercy and joy?

Pastor Ron told a story about how as a kid he was in trouble for something, and when he had cooled off and went to apologize to his father, his dad said the strangest thing: "You didn't have to apologize; you were already forgiven." There's a curious kind of judgment in the lack of judgment; it causes us to feel really sorry for how we've messed things up when we receive total mercy with no requirement for an accounting or an apology. It causes us to judge our

own actions and motives and reflect a little more when we are faced with the reality that we are already forgiven, even though we don't 'deserve' it.

Grace just surrounds us. It's wildly irresponsible of God just to forgive us. But at every turn there is wild grace. Unmerited mercy might just be the first step toward redemption.

We may feel some sort of solidarity with the older brother, the one who stayed home and never got the celebration. It seems unfair. We hear the seductive voices deep inside us that want us to prove our worth, to be enough, to deserve the reward. But the father in this parable didn't give his younger son the royal treatment because of what he had done. He threw the party, he rejoiced, because of who the younger son was—his beloved child. He loved him. Not because of something...he just loved him.

It's a gift, this love, this grace, and it's one that God won't take back. God sees us coming from a distance and runs to us, embraces us, and welcomes us into this family, even when we wander aimlessly. It's irresponsible, over the top, foolish prodigal grace. God loves us, period.

Scripture

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (NRSVUE)

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ So he told them this parable:

¹¹ Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.' ²² 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.

²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² 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.'"

Discussion Questions

1. We have heard the story of the prodigal son many times, and we have probably heard many sermons preached from this text. What did you hear that was different or new in Pastor Ron's sermon this week? Any new insights that came to you?
2. Pastor Ron talked about the definition of the word 'prodigal.' Did this definition surprise you at all? What connotations does the word hold? Does it jar your thinking to use the word 'prodigal' as an adjective for God?
3. Much of our fascination with this parable lies in the emotions and reactions of the elder brother. We don't hear how he reacted to his father's response. We don't know if he joined the party to welcome his brother home. Why do we tend to focus on the older brother? What do we think he did in response to his father's words? Could he accept his father's prodigal love for them both?
4. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, theologian, and poet, has said in an observation of humanity: "It is not that I have a long journey to undertake in order to get to God, but rather that I have a long journey to my own reality." Describe that journey for each of the two sons in this story.
5. As people, we cannot seem to understand how we can be loved or accepted if we haven't proved ourselves worthy. We can't imagine being forgiven if we haven't 'made up' for whatever we did wrong. Why is this so hard for us? What journeys are we called to take in order to wake ourselves up to the reality that God loves us...full stop.
6. Pastor Ron quoted a theologian who said: "Only when, like the prodigal, we are finally confronted with the unqualified gift of someone who died to forgive us no matter what, can we see that confession has nothing to do with getting ourselves forgiven...Forgiveness surrounds us, beats upon us all our lives; we confess to wake ourselves up to what we already have."

How is this idea of the relationship of confession and pardon different from others we may hear in the world?

Closing Prayer

Holy and prodigal God, all too often we find ourselves in a foreign land, without resources to save ourselves. We face systems that make us afraid, ideas and ideologies that demean and exclude, dysfunction that paralyzes us, and still, we find ourselves compliant or even complicit in the face of our fears.

And yet, and yet—you wait on the ‘front porch’ of our lives, yearning for us to come home to you. You call us to remember that home with you is where we belong. You run to meet us, and you embrace us when we take the first step toward home. You call us beloved, and your steadfast love and amazing grace transforms us beyond what we could ever imagine. We bow our heads in gratitude and praise. We pray this in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

“God loves you. Period.”