

Correcting the Title

A sermon in the 2022 sermon series “Reading Between the Lines”

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Luke 15:11-32 (GNT) ¹¹ Jesus went on to say, “There was once a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to him, ‘Father, give me my share of the property now.’ So the man divided his property between his two sons. ¹³ After a few days the younger son sold his part of the property and left home with the money. He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. ¹⁴ He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing. ¹⁵ So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. ¹⁶ He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat. ¹⁷ At last he came to his senses and said, ‘All my father’s hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against God and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers.”’ ²⁰ So he got up and started back to his father.

“He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him. ²¹ ‘Father,’ the son said, ‘I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.’ ²² But the father called to his servants. ‘Hurry!’ he said. ‘Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. ²³ Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’ And so the feasting began.

²⁵ “In the meantime the older son was out in the field. On his way back, when he came close to the house, he heard the music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him, ‘What’s going on?’ ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come back home,’ the servant answered, ‘and your father has killed the prize calf, because he got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ The older brother was so angry that he would not go into the house; so his father came out and begged him to come in. ²⁹ But he spoke back to his father, ‘Look, all these years I have worked for you like a slave, and I have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me? Not even a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! ³⁰ But this son of yours wasted all your property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home, you kill the prize calf for him!’

³¹ ‘My son,’ the father answered, ‘you are always here with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be happy, because your brother was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’”

How can it be that the most famous parable coming from the lips of Jesus has been saddled with a misleading title? When I was a kid, I knew the parable before I knew what the word “prodigal” meant. I assumed that it meant “lost,” because the younger son ran away from home, eventually realized where he really belonged, and when he found the courage to go home, his father told others that the son had been lost but now had been found.

It wasn’t until much later that I learned that prodigal is one of those words in the English language that can have two opposite meanings. “Prodigal” can mean “extremely generous or lavish,” or in the case of the younger son in the story, it can

mean “exceedingly or recklessly wasteful.” But without that knowledge it’s easy to see why one would presume that “prodigal” means lost because of the parable’s context in Luke’s gospel.

Religious officials and other leaders of the Jewish faith were giving Jesus a hard time because Jesus had no problem rubbing elbows with the kinds of people that others looked down upon. The Bible describes them as “outcasts.” In our day those who have been cast out of mainline society might include people who live on the streets, people trying to turn their lives around after doing jail time, people caught up in the sex industry, people held hostage by addictions, those who have a hard time holding down a job... “outcasts.”

But Jesus *didn’t* cast them out, he *didn’t* push them away. He welcomed them because they came to him eager to learn about embracing God’s way. Jesus viewed them as having been lost but now having been found.

To help the religious leaders see the so-called outcasts from that perspective, Jesus told three parables. He talked about a farmer who leaves ninety-nine sheep in order to search for the one sheep which had become lost. He talked about a woman who searches and searches until she finds the one coin she had lost. Jesus noted the joy felt by the farmer and the woman at having recovered what had been lost.

Then Jesus told the story we just heard.

The younger son is not described as married, so he’s probably around twenty years of age and, consequently, susceptible to moments of immaturity and impulsivity. He asks his father for that share of the family property which would come to him when the father dies. But asking for his inheritance prematurely was an act of cutting off all ties with his family. It was like telling his father, “I want nothing more to do with you. You’re out of my life.” We can imagine how much that would pain the father... but out of love for his son, the father honors the young man’s request.

Before long, the glow of living the high life fades away with the cash, and the younger son has to scrounge just for his daily bread. He hires himself out to a Gentile (non-Jewish) farmer who has him care for his herd of pigs – “to a Jew no fate could be more degrading than to feed pigs for a Gentile master.”¹ But what choice did he have? He even covets the food he’s feeding the herd of swine – seed pods that only the poorest people would eat out of desperation.

Eventually, the younger son’s desperation graces him with clarity: he will return to his home, apologize to his father for offending him and for squandering part of his father’s estate, and ask if his father might at least hire him as a worker on the farm. After all, the younger son reasons, at least his father’s servants have a place to live and food to eat.

As the young man approaches the homestead, the father sees him while he is still far off. The father lifts the hem of his robe and runs toward his son. “In ancient Palestine it was regarded as unbecoming – a loss of dignity – for a grown man to run. Yet the father set aside all concern for propriety and ran.”²

¹ G.B. Caird. *St. Luke*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963, 183

² *New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX: Luke-John*. Nashville: Abington Press, 1995, 302b

As the younger son begins to pour out his heart with the words he has pondered and rehearsed over and over, the father hugs and kisses his son. Then he calls to his servants to make preparations for a party and to bring the son a new robe, some shoes, a ring for his finger – all signifying that this person is no mere visitor or hired hand: he’s family. Despite all he had done to offend the father, he was still “family.”

Nice resolution. Happy ending. Some people stop reading the parable at this point. But what happens next is essential for the parable’s power. The father’s older son comes in from the field, heading to the house for dinner. As he approaches the house the older brother hears music playing. He asks a hired hand what’s going on.

“Your father’s throwing a party because your brother has come back!”

The older son is immediately resentful and furious. He won’t even go into the house for his dinner. The father notices, and comes out to his older son, urging him to join the celebration.

But the older son complains that it’s not fair. He has been obedient, hard-working. But did *he* ever get a party? No. He says to his father, “But this son of yours [not “my brother”] wasted all your property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home, you kill the prize calf for him!” (He throws in the unfounded accusation of prostitution just to try to stir up his father’s anger.)

But the father doesn’t take the bait. Instead, he assures his older son of his constant love for him. “You’re always with me,” the father tells him. “All I have is yours. But we’re celebrating because your brother was lost, and now he’s found again!”

“The parable leaves us with the question of whether the elder brother joined the celebration. Did he go in and welcome his brother home, or did he stay outside pouting and feeling wronged?³

We wonder.

The power of a parable is how it invites us to step in and find ourselves in the story. Perhaps there are those times you can relate to the younger son, both in his moments of rash, impulsive, self-centeredness and in his sincere, remorseful, courageous act of recognizing his missteps and seeking forgiveness.

Maybe you’ve known times when you could relate to the older brother’s hardline sense of justice – justice that’s offended when it seems that a gift of grace is a consequence-free excuse to overlook error or failure or sin.

But while the two sons occupy most of the parable, they’re not the focus of the story. Let’s recall how it begins. Luke writes, “Jesus told them this parable...: ‘There was once a man who had two sons....’” This not the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It’s the Parable of the Father’s Love.

Remember, Jesus told the story to respond to the complaints of the religious leaders that he welcomed “outcasts” into his life. Jesus told the parable to show how God’s love works. God welcomes all. God’s willing to forgive someone who turns away from past mistakes, failures, sin. God’s overjoyed to welcome home one who had become lost, who separated from God. “No other image has come closer to describing

³ New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX: Luke-John. Nashville: Abington Press, 1995, 305

the character of God than the waiting father, peering down the road longing for the son's return, then springing to his feet and running to meet him."⁴ "The father's celebration conveys the joy in heaven. The picture is one of sheer grace. No penance is required; it is enough that the son has come home."⁵

If the *prodigal son* was "recklessly wasteful" with the proceeds of his premature inheritance, the *prodigal father* was "extremely, lavishly generous" in forgiveness and love... generously loving both sons.⁶ That generous love is sign that God actively searches for the human sinner who repents.⁷

The parable invites you to provide an ending to the story with your own life. You've been invited to join the celebration – to accept grace as our Heavenly Father's rule for life in the family of faith. But the decision is yours.

Will you protest the Father's gracious love and forgiveness? Or will you confront how you've fallen short of the Father's will, seek forgiveness and accept the new life graciously and generously offered to you? As the Parable of the Father's Love illustrates, God longs to welcome with joy all who were lost but desire to be found. God longs to welcome all.

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⁴ New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX: Luke-John. Nashville: Abington Press, 1995, 302

⁵ New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX: Luke-John. Nashville: Abington Press, 1995, 305

⁶ Cf. Jerome Kodell, O.S.B. The Gospel According to Luke. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1983, 77

⁷ Cf. Robert J. Karris, Invitation to Luke. Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1977, 185