

## The Prodigal Family

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent; March 31, 2019

To paraphrase Corinthians, when I was a child, I spoke like a child and I also heard words as a child would hear them. Who among us hasn't joyfully sung the Christmas carol about Harold? You know, "Hark, the Harold Angel sings"? Or the hymn about Gladly, the Cross-Eyed Bear. Or even the song by Creedence Clearwater Revival "There's a Bathroom on the Right"?

Which is to say that even as a verbal species that endows words with a lot of weight, we don't always get it right.

The prodigal son. Oh, that kid... People are always telling stories about the child that just had the wanderlust, the one that had to see the world for herself, the one that just wasn't cut out for college. But then they came back. The prodigal returned. But we are still seeing through a glass darkly; we have the word all wrong. Like a lot of people including myself, our patron Saint Nadia grew up believing that the word prodigal meant "returning having repented of your wrongs... or at least coming home after having been independent and stupid for awhile." The true definition, according to next year's possible Lent Madness winner St Wikipedia, is spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant.

She wonders why the parable is even entitled The Prodigal Son, when that's kind of the expected norm. As a parent like many of us, she points out "it's actually common for young people to leave home, waste their lives and their money for awhile until they have no other option but to come home to the parents they didn't treat very well when they were leaving in the first place. Maybe", she wonders, "we make this a story about the wasteful stupidity of the younger son because it's a story that we are familiar with".

But according to Joey Nelson, pastor of Stone Hill's Community Church in Indiana, we need to reframe the parable, recognizing the extravagance of the father.

He points out that. "The first son was obviously lost. He was described as being in a "distant country." Apparently the Father was hopeful that his son would return home someday and often would cast a glance down the road just to see if today would be the day that the family could be back together again. When he saw him, he began to run. No amount of dignity could stop him. There was no reserve on his love. There was no period of restitution discussed. He did not keep him at a distance until his son measured up; until there were some guarantees that his son would not take advantage of him again. The son was not even able to give his well-rehearsed confession because the Father was there so quickly! This initial embrace was followed by lavish, symbolic assurances of affection and sonship, a robe, a ring, new sandals, and a feast – all of these things speak of being restored as a son, not a servant as he requested."

The love of this father, the love of any of us who are parents, is extravagant and like any relationship, this love comes at great risk.

Here's a story that I remembered while I was reading and thinking about this sermon:

When my sons were about, I don't know, maybe five and seven, I took them to the farm show in Harrisburg, along with some friends and their children. All you who are parents know what happened next. I relaxed my vigilance for just a minute and the younger one vanished. In the arena. Filled with a million people. Totally disappeared. That feeling? The one that says that your younger son has disappeared? I imagine the father in the parable knows that feeling. So of course he would throw dignity to the winds and run with abandon to the son that had been lost but was then found. (My child, by the way, was found safely by his panicked mother sound asleep, not far away, nestled against the comforting warm side of a reclining cow. Really. You can't make this stuff up)

But Pastor Nelson believes that this deep little parable isn't just about the younger son and the father, each of whom demonstrated prodigality in his own way. How about that older son, the "good one", the one who did everything that was expected of him? In his way, he was also lost. He says "The older son was lost in a more subtle way and the feasting brings this out. Jesus said that the elder son was "in the field" as opposed to the "distant country." He was responsible. He was industrious. He would never think of squandering his father's resources. And when he hears the sounds of a celebration and understands that his younger brother has returned home, his mind is filled with questions as he approaches the house. "Why is everyone celebrating? Why are the servants not working? Why celebrate the homecoming of my dumb brother who's made my Father look like a fool? Why does he get the party? I've been here all of this time and never left once, and Dad never did anything like this for me? I've been doing this for all of these years and this is what I get for it? He got the calf and I didn't even get A GOAT!" By the time he reached the house, he was so angry and jealous that he would not go inside. He would not dignify the celebration with his presence because favor and affection was something that you earned. I can hear the older brother's thoughts", Pastor Nelson says. "I've earned the right to have a party in my honor. My brother has not earned it, and yet he's the one receiving it and that's wrong. I'm not running around for the likes of him." Whereas the younger brother blatantly had entered the far country, this older brother had drifted into the same place over time inside his heart. He couldn't forgive. The elder son appears to be, at the end of the story, where the younger one was at the beginning: far away from home, estranged from his father."

And yet, this lost son, the one who doesn't even realize that he's lost in the first place, he also is beloved by his prodigal father. Nadia points out that she is floored by the wasteful extravagance of the father toward him, toward the "kid who never left him. The one who has always done everything right. The kid who is clean-cut and went to college right out of high school and came back to work in his father's business. The kid who always signs up to do jobs at the synagogue but resentfully notices all the slackers who show up and never help at all. The kid who feels

entitled. The kid who can't stomach going to a party to celebrate the return of his screw-up brother."

That the father says to that kid, "All that is mine is yours".

In some ways, I see parables as two by fours, the dope slap we need to be reminded. They are the never-ceasing question "Don't you see God in this?" I know it's simplistic to reduce God to this parental anthropomorphic model, but who is that prodigal father if not the God who shakes his head at how we constantly mess up but still takes the risk of loving us even when we clearly don't deserve it. She reminds us that our relationship to God is not determined by our virtue, by whether we can relate to the profligate younger son or to the by-the-books older one. It is not determined by being nice, or good or by how much we do at church. Our relationship with God is simply determined by the wastefully extravagant love of God. A God, she says, who takes no account of risk but runs toward you no matter what, saying all that is mine is yours.

Jonathan Thomas, a priest in Illinois whom I have mentioned before, ends his reflection on this parable with the following. "Every time we wander, God sits on the porch praying for signs of life, dreaming of our return, hoping for the moment to present itself where we appear on the horizon a long way off, wild and beaten down from our poor choices, when the father can run to us and embrace us with arms of love as wide as the sea. The story", he points out, "is not about you or your sin. It's about the father and his love. Desmond Tutu writes this of the longing of the God who sits on the porch, looking out on the horizon for his children. 'I have a dream, God says. Please help me realize it...that my children will know that they are members of one family...God's family. My family.'"

The prodigal father turns to the older son, the resentful one, the one who sees the love of his father as a zero-sum game with love being piled on the wastrel who doesn't deserve it. The bitter son. And the father reminds him, all that I have is yours. It's already yours. If you can't be happy to see your brother, at least come and share in my joy at his return. Come to the party.

It's all already ours. The love, the welcome, the forgiveness, the open arms, the grace. So come. Let's go to the party and join the family.

Amen.