

The Prodigal Father
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
March 6, 2016

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' "

This parable is one almost everyone knows. Whether young or old, pastor or laity, believer or unbeliever, almost every knows this parable. It's a story about a greedy, sinful person who comes to his senses and returns home to a loving, forgiving father who has just been waiting for the day to come. It's a beautiful story of love and forgiveness.

It's the love and forgiveness that makes me wonder about the title normally given to this parable. This parable isn't so much about a wayward son who repents and returns home as it is about the unconditional love and compassion of a father. That's not to say repentance isn't a major theme in this story, but there's more to the story. Today, let's take a long look at good old dad.

As a rule we focus on the son. Why not? We can easily identify with him. It's easy to compare some of our friends and family with the son. This parable lets us look at the wayward, either us or them, and think, "It's good to know that if we/they return there is forgiveness and acceptance. God will forgive and take the repentant back into the fold, no strings attached."

There's also the other character in the parable – the older brother. He had a real problem with dad welcoming junior back home with no consequences. Chances are, there isn't a person here who, at one time or another, can't identify with that brother. "It's not fair. I've been working my fingers to the bone and what do I get? Nothing!"

But we want to think about dad, and more than just the fact that dad represents God the Father. Dad agrees to a very selfish request from his younger son. The boy would eventually have his share of his father's riches, but he couldn't wait for that.

"Give me my share, now!" In other words, "Dad, I don't care if you live or die. I want my money." The crazy part of all of this is that the father does it. Given that attitude, how many of you would be that gracious? The father doesn't reprimand the boy. He doesn't write him out of his will for being so callous and greedy. He just fulfills his son's request. The son who doesn't care if his dad lives or dies.

Fast forward in the parable. The son has hit rock bottom. In a moment of clarity, he decides to go back home. He knows his father is a good man and, at very least, he'll have food, clothing, and shelter.

No one in the land he had gone to offered him any mercy after his money ran out. No one there knew him prior to his arriving, so they didn't know what kind of a scoundrel he was. Undoubtedly, the people back home had heard about how he treated his father, and that's why he didn't look to them for help. He went home to dad. He knew that only in his father would he find the mercy he needed. So the son gathered up what was left of his dignity and headed for home.

Now, we have dad waiting and watching for his son to come home. For a long time dad has been waiting and watching. Finally, way down to the road he sees a figure on the horizon. He sees his son before his son sees him.

The father takes off running down the road. He doesn't wait for his son to come graveling back with his tail between his legs. He doesn't zing his son with a well-deserved "It's about time" or "I tried to tell you" or even "Be careful what you ask for." The father rushes to his son, throws his arms around him, and showers him with undeserved love.

Have you ever wondered why the father never went looking for his son; why he didn't track him down and beg him to come home? As a pastor, I understand. When someone leaves, you never stop waiting and watching. However, when a wayward child is intent on staying away, they will stay away. It's heartbreaking, but all you can do is wait and

watch and pray. If that wayward one returns, you welcome him or her back; no questions asked, no punishment to endure.

The father welcomed his son back in a very public manner – a great banquet celebration. There would have been no doubt in the townsfolk’s minds that the son had been accepted back into the family without caveats or conditions. He was completely restored. That says that if the father took his son back without making the boy jump through hoops, then everyone else should welcome him back in the same manner.

That’s not to say the son wasn’t willing to do whatever was necessary to come back into his father’s good graces. Listen to the son’s plan: *I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”* (Lk 15:18-19). The son’s plan was repentance and penance. This is what the Pharisees and the scribes expected. It’s also what had them in such an uproar. Jesus was associating with “sinners” without expecting them to do special things to pay for their sins.

The father welcomed his son back into the family without asking for the son to repay his debt because the father knew the debt was more than his son could ever pay. There was no amount of good deeds and good intentions that could make up for the harm and the damage that had been done.

If things were going to be set right, it would have to depend solely on the mercy of the father. That is exactly what happened. The father spared no mercy, no love, no expense to bring his once-dead son back to life.

So what about this idea of the prodigal father? Most people don’t know what the word prodigal means. Prodigal doesn’t mean to be wayward or corrupt, selfish or greedy, or missing in action. The dictionary defines prodigal as: 1) spending money or resources freely or recklessly; 2) having or giving something on a lavish scale. Was the son prodigal? Yes. He foolishly wasted his money.

However, in a good way, dad was also prodigal. He lavished mercy, love, and forgiveness on his now-humble son. That’s what the sinners of Christ’s day understood. They knew that when Jesus lavished undeserved grace, mercy, and forgiveness on them they were completely forgiven and restored to the Father’s family. That’s what the Pharisees and scribes didn’t understand, and that’s why they grumbled and complained.

This parable speaks to us today. Our life, our forgiveness, our salvation, our everything is a result of our heavenly Father’s prodigal love and compassion for us. Do we go astray? Yes. When we do, our Father may allow us to have our own way. He’s not happy about our actions, but our Father doesn’t bully us into doing things his way. God will not try to force us to love him.

At the same time, he’s always there, arms open wide, waiting to receive us back home where we belong. When we return, there are no strings, no conditions, no hoops to

jump through. Our debt is too big. The damage is too great. The wages of sin is death, and we can't pay for even one little sin. If we are to be restored, it has to be the work of the Father.

Talk about prodigal. Our Father gave his only Son for us. He took it upon himself to make complete payment for our sin. Through Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection, God has bridged the chasm that separated us and him. We didn't build the bridge that opens the way home to God – God did. Because of Christ, we are redeemed.