

**Rev. Mike Cole**  
**Providence Presbyterian Church**  
**Fourth Sunday in Lent**  
**March 30, 2025**  
**II Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32**

**"Our Prodigal God"**

Once upon a time the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" was being retold to a Sunday School class, complete with a description of the feast on the fatted calf. After describing the celebration of the household over the return of the younger son and the begrudging attitude of the older son, the teacher said, "Can anyone tell me who was not happy at the return of the younger brother?" Little Tommy's hand shot up as he said, "I know. It was the fatted calf." No matter how many times we hear this parable, we can always get some fresh insights into its wisdom.

Remembering that the definition of "prodigal" is extravagant, lavish, or unrestrained, let's re-examine this parable as if we were hearing it for the very first time. Jesus told this parable as a response to the grumbling of the Pharisees, who were upset that Jesus had welcomed sinners at his table. Although the spotlight has traditionally been focused upon the younger son, this really is a story about the incredible love of a father. More than being a parable of the prodigal son, referring to the unrestrained living of the younger boy, this is a tale of our prodigal God, describing God's extravagant love.

When the younger son requested the division and disposition of his father's property, he was actually issuing a supreme insult to his father; something tantamount to saying, "I wish you were dead!" The father's surprising response of agreement is a demonstration of an unexpected quality of love which allows the freedom even to reject the lover. This is a marvelously unique love whose foundation is not the worthiness of the recipient, but the goodness of the giver.

Although the popular notion is that the younger son wasted his inheritance in riotous living, a detail provided only in the unsubstantiated accusation of the older son, he did spend everything and wound up herding pigs for a Gentile (definitely not a Kosher occupation). While grubbing with the swine, the boy came to his senses, and devised a plan to return home and get a job as a servant in his father's household. As repentant as this might appear on the surface, it actually was nothing less than an attempt to save himself, which Scripture reminds us is not repentance at all. Even at the bottom of the

barrel, he was not willing to give up control over his life. He did not expect grace. But he had a huge surprise awaiting him at home.

Upon hearing of his son's arrival at the outskirts of town, and knowing that his son would likely face verbal and physical abuse from the townspeople who had been offended at his impertinent behavior, the father ran to greet his son with a kiss at the edge of town. This may not seem like much to us, except that an oriental nobleman never runs anywhere. To do so would be humiliating. The father was willing to make a ridiculous spectacle of himself dashing through town with his finest robes gathered in his hands above his knobby knees as he outran the insults about to be hurled at his son.

Astounded at the sight of such astonishing love, the younger son truly repented - he relinquished his pride and his ill-conceived plan to save himself, and accepted the gracious offer of reconciliation with his father.

We have all had times in our lives when we have needed to repent of some sin. Whereas repentance between human beings generally means something we must do, repentance with God means something we have to be. To repent in God's sight means to be willing to accept the forgiveness which we don't deserve and can never earn. The younger son's repentance was complete only when he accepted his father's extravagant grace. The father absorbed the insults his son deserved, just as Jesus Christ would later run the gauntlet of insults, torture and death for us.

Through this parable Jesus makes it clear that God's behavior is like that of a parent welcoming home a child who was an outcast and a sinner. The parable is a finely crafted response to the Pharisees who criticized Jesus' association with outcasts and sinners. Jesus welcomed outcasts and sinners because God does. And so must we.

With the return of the younger son, the father called for a Presbyterian potluck dinner at his house. Once again, the spotlight shifted to the outskirts of town where the older son was returning from work. In spite of the mouth-watering aroma of roast beef and the wild rhythmic music that filled the air, the older son decided not to enter into the joyous occasion. In the Middle East, this decision would have been humiliating to the father, since the oldest son would have been expected to be the host at all celebrations.

For the second time in one day, the father made the trip out to the edge of town in a public display of humility to restore a broken relationship - this time with the older son. Unlike his younger brother who repented in the face of such astounding grace, the older brother issued a double complaint: "I have slaved for you and you have never given me a feast." Refusing to be put off by his older son's "spoiled brat performance," the father entreated him to be reconciled to his family. The father's speech was a cry from the heart to understand grace.

The mastery and mystery of this parable is that it ends with this monologue from the father, inviting the older son to rejoice over his brother who was dead and now is alive; who was lost but has been found. As the curtain rings down on the drama of this parable, we are left with the realization that the older son is now the one who is dead. The unanswered question is, "Can he come to life?"

A major implication of this parable for the first audience clearly was to chastise the Pharisees and all those who were respectable and obedient to a fault. But it does far more than that. First, the parable contrasts two views of sin: sin occurs both when we say "no" to God and mean it and when we say "yes" to God but don't mean it. Second, the parable speaks of repentance not as a way to earn our salvation, but as the acceptance of the unmerited grace of God. Third, Jesus gives a radically new definition of grace - one which he was to live out - costly love which seeks and suffers in order to save. Fourth, he also establishes the central place of joy within the community of faith. And finally, he leaves the door open for all children of God, older and younger, to return to the family and join in the festivities.

Although we can identify with the heartache of the father, clearly we are more like his two offspring, both of them. There are times in our lives when we are more like the prodigal, living a life that is self-centered and unrestrained. On the other hand, there have been times in our lives when we were much more like the other son - dutiful, begrudging grace to others, denying forgiveness, expecting to earn our place in the family of God. The good news is that even when we refuse to enter into the joy of the festival of life which God throws every day, the Lord still comes out from the party to entreat us to return. No matter what our sin is, there is divine grace enough to absorb all the insults, taunts, and derision we may deserve. Not only that, God chooses to come out to us wherever we are, whether we are outcast physically or spiritually and invites us to rejoin the festival of life.

Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul expects reconciliation to be an identifying characteristic of Christians. Having been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, Paul expects us to accept the ministry of reconciliation as our own ministry. Paul tells us that we are a special people not because we are so great but because God is so great. It is this greatness which empowers us to break down the walls which separate us rather than build them up; to forgive rather than hold a grudge; to swallow our pride rather than boast.

Of course there will be behavior that we cannot and should not tolerate, both in ourselves and in others, but because of the extravagant grace we have received, we will strive to see through other folk's disagreeable behavior to the struggling child of God we know is there. We will hate the sin, but we will love the sinner.

If we follow Jesus Christ and accept as our own the ministry of reconciliation, love will not be a prize stingily given in return for certain expectations met. Love will be a gift overflowing from within us. And there will be plenty to go around. What is required of us is a new vantage point.

I am reminded of the story of a little girl who kept bragging to her father about what a great hitter she was in baseball. Finally, the father agreed to watch her. So the little girl got her bat and ball and went out into the backyard. The father stood off to one side while the girl tossed the ball up into the air and swung the bat with all her might. "Strike one," said the little girl after she had missed the ball completely. "Strike two," she said as she missed the ball a second time. "Strike three," she said as she missed a third time. Then she turned to her father with a determined glow on her face and said, "Boy, am I a great pitcher!"

Sometimes what is required of us is seeing things from a new perspective. The perspective of today's parable of our prodigal God calls our attention to the costly grace of God which seeks our reconciliation no matter what our sin may be - obvious or undetected.

The challenge of the parable is not just to identify ourselves or our neighbors with one or the other of the sons. The challenge of the parable is to imitate the father, exhibiting prodigal grace in our relationships with one another.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen**