

C Lent 4
10 March 2013
Luke 15:11-32
"Two Sons"

One evening a family was enjoying dinner together when the youngest son said to his father, "Dad, are bugs good to eat?" The father replied, "Ben, we shouldn't talk about that at the dinner table. You can ask me after dinner." When dinner was over and the family was relaxing in the living room, the father asked his son, "Ben, what did you want to ask me about bugs?" Ben replied, "Never mind, Dad. There was a bug in your soup, but it's gone now."

Almost everyone knows the parable of the Prodigal Son. You find that title at the top of this passage in many Bibles. "Prodigal" is not a word we use every day. What does it mean? The dictionary says: wastefully or recklessly extravagant; giving or yielding profusely; lavishly abundant. The first definition is very descriptive of this son who wastes his inheritance. The other two are not so appropriate to his behavior. However, all three of them are descriptive of the way the father behaves in this parable. A much better title for it is "The Parable of the Prodigal Father." The father who loves extravagantly, lavishly, abundantly.

Beyond that, the parable is really about the father, anyway, not about the son. So our proposed new title also has the advantage of drawing our attention away from the reckless son and instead centering it where it needs to be: on the extravagant father.

Context is everything for this particular parable. We find it in the first two verses of chapter 15: Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So here's what I would like you to do right now. Think: "older brother." The Pharisees and scribes, as they often do, are upset because of the company that Jesus is keeping. Why those miserable tax collectors and other sinners. Why is this supposed great teacher from Galilee hanging out with them? Doesn't he know what kind of people these are? They are violating the law of Moses. He can't be all that great if he insists on spending time with this kind of riff-raff. Think: Older brother.

Jesus replies to the complaints of the scribes and Pharisees with three parables, of which the one about the loving father is the last. The loving father, of course, represents God the Father, and the errant younger son represents the tax collectors and other sinners. Oh, and the faithful older son represents the scribes and Pharisees.

So the younger son gets tired of laboring in the fields all day and works up his courage to ask his father for his part of the inheritance that will go to him and his older brother. We are not told if there are still other brothers, but we will assume not. Then, according to Jewish practice, the ne'er do well younger son would probably have inherited one third of his father's wealth.

Stop and think for a moment what that wealth would be. Probably not money in the bank. Rather, the father's wealth would almost certainly have been land, land that was likely passed down to him from his own father. The only way for the father to give him his one third would be to sell that much of his land. In order to give his younger son what he asked for, the father would have had to sell one third of his land. We have seen recently that it is possible that the sold land would revert back to him in the Year of Jubilee, but who knows how well that old practice was working in the time of Jesus? Maybe the land would actually be gone forever.

Beyond that, it was unthinkable at that time for a son to do what this son does. To ask for his part of the inheritance in advance is a significant breach of the commandment to honor father and mother. In essence, the request relays the message, "Dad, I can't wait for you to die, so please give me my inheritance now."

Amazingly enough, the father does what the younger son asks, and gives him his inheritance. We might ruminate for a moment or two on what that part of the parable has to say about the freedom each one of us is given to do what is wrong, to do what is hurtful to God, to sin against God. Because surely that is what the younger son does to his father. We have the freedom to sin, and boy, do we make use of that freedom.

So the son takes his inheritance, the profit, very likely, of the sale of part of his father's land, and takes off for the first-century equivalent of Las Vegas. Maybe that was the city of Corinth, because we know from other sources that Corinth was a somewhat disreputable town in those days.

Be that as it may, the younger son wastes no time in blowing his inheritance in what the King James version calls "riotous living." The money is quickly gone, and a famine falls on the land where he is living. He is forced to feed pigs. Remember that according to the Jewish law pigs are considered not just physically but religiously unclean. Jews are supposed to have nothing to do with pigs. And furthermore, whatever he makes taking care of the pigs must not be much, because he is still starving. He is even tempted to eat the same food the pigs are eating.

He comes to himself and realizes that his father's slaves are living better than he is now. Who knows how long he has to wrestle with the decision. Pride is a very strong motivator. But eventually his growling stomach wins, and he resolves to return home and grovel. He writes a little speech in his mind, and he rehearses it all the way home. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am not worthy to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired hands."

So the younger son trudges home, dirty, unkempt, hungry, repeating his little speech. After many days, maybe weeks, maybe months, he comes within sight of his home. He prepares to deliver the speech for real. His father sees him from a long way off, and casting aside the traditional Jewish decorum of an elder, runs to his errant son, wraps his arms around him, and kisses him. I can always imagine tears flowing down his cheeks as well, and perhaps his shoulders moving as he quietly sobs.

The son begins his carefully prepared speech, but he doesn't get to finish it. Perhaps he also is too overcome with emotion to be able to speak.

Eventually the father calls to one of his servants, who has likely come running up, "Quick! Run and get the best robe in the house for my son, and get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. Oh, and go prepare the best calf in the herd, for tonight we are going to celebrate. Because, look! This, my son, was dead, and is now alive. He was lost, and now he is found.

There is a sense expressed throughout scripture that sin estranges us from the living God, so that we become lost. And there is a message, found throughout scripture, that sin actually renders us dead. Paul writes about us being "dead in our sins."

But this son repents, he literally turns around, he recognizes his sin, and he returns to his father. Remember the passage we considered last week in which Jesus tells us that we must repent, indeed constantly be repenting, or we will perish. But, he reminds us, there is a gardener, perhaps himself, perhaps the Holy Spirit, perhaps his Father, perhaps all three, who is always caring for us as if we were trees. We must indeed repent, as the younger son does, but we have someone, a mighty someone, on our side.

And so the party begins. Now the faithful older son hears all the noise and asks a servant what is going on. When he hears that his father is throwing a party for his useless brother, he is incensed, and he refuses to go in to celebrate with the others. When his father comes out and pleads with him to come in, he says, "Look, Dad. All these years I have slaved for you, and I have always done what you have asked of me. Yet you have never thrown a party for me and my friends. But when this son of yours returns, who has wasted your property with prostitutes, you have even prepared the best calf in the herd for him!"

The father replies, "Son, I know that you have always been faithful, and that you have served me well and without question. All that is mine is yours. But we simply had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead, and is now alive. He was lost, and has been found."

Note the older son says, "this son of yours." The father reminds him, "this brother of yours." The message to those peeved scribes and Pharisees: don't set yourselves above these tax collectors and sinners. God rejoices in your faithfulness and in your service. But God rejoices even more when one of them "comes to himself" (or herself), repents, turns around, and comes home. Don't be resentful. Instead, come and celebrate! This one was dead, but is now alive. Was lost, and has been found.

In the first part of Luke chapter 15, which is not a part of today's reading, but which has the same theme, Jesus says, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance."

I heard a sermon a few years ago in which the preacher started out by saying that most Presbyterians are older brothers. Most of us have never done anything terribly wrong. We have been faithful, model citizens. We have always paid our taxes and obeyed the law. Most of us are older brothers. The danger we face is that we will despise or scorn those who are like the younger brother. It is in Luke's gospel, chapter 18, where we find the Pharisee who stands in the temple and is so proud of himself because he is (quote) not like others, thieves, rogues, and adulterers, but rather fasts and tithes of his income. There Jesus says it is not this proud Pharisee, but the lowly tax collector there with him, who begs for mercy from God, who will leave the temple justified in God's eyes.

At the end of his sermon, however, the preacher reminded us Presbyterians that all of us are really younger brothers. All of us are despicable sinners. All of us injure God and others. All of us run away from God. The preacher reminded us that, while some of us may act like older brothers, thinking ourselves somehow superior, in fact, we are all prodigal sons and daughters, in the negative meaning of that word.

The parable is not about us. It is about the father. The Father who eagerly waits for us to turn and return, so that he can wrap his arms around us and give us kiss, put on us the best robe, a ring and sandals, and throw a party for us.

The Father who sheds every remnant of decorum in his delight. And, I still think, the Father who silently sheds tears of joy, as he wraps us in his extravagant, excessive, prodigal embrace.