

THE PRODIGALS

TEXT: Luke 15:11-32

There has been so much said, and so much written about today's story of the prodigal son. I believe every character in the story has been researched, dissected, and psychoanalyzed to the point where we may be getting a little tired of them. Each one has been treated as the protagonist of the story – the prodigal father, the prodigal son, the prodigal brother – we have come to know them like our nearest neighbor.

The rather satirical reading of the scripture this morning emphasizes that this story is repeated over and over in every society. The characters may change, the setting may change, the language may change, but the basic story remains. One of the flock claims independence and inheritance, blows it, contritely returns to the welcoming arms of the parent, to the chagrin of others in the family and in the neighborhood.

In a recent article, a woman wrote: “I Am the Prodigal Daughter”. Her story: “I left my faith for many years, then returned and was startled by the anger of others of my faith who were angry that God was still waiting for me. It seemed they felt that I had forsaken my birthright and that I didn't deserve to be a member of my faith anymore because I had sinned, because I had spoken against the faith, because I had changed. But I feel that God welcomed me home and killed the fatted calf for me. He killed the fatted calf for me. He carried me on his shoulders and rejoiced with me. Anyone who has been through a difficult trial must recognize this moment. I didn't take my father's money and have fun with it. There was no “riotous living” here, unless you count doing triathlons as riotous living. I was broken by the death of my daughter and in an attempt to survive the depression that hit me as a result of that, I gave up my belief in the church and my belief in God. I continued to attend church, but it was a sham. Everything I did was a sham. I was a hollow shell of a person who was unsure if anything would ever fill the shell again.”

I think we all go through phases like this, for different reasons. Maybe your reason for becoming a prodigal was that you were busy going to college and figuring out what you wanted with your life. Maybe you became a prodigal because you were hurt by something or what someone in your religion said or did to you. Maybe you became a prodigal because you were told there was no place for you in your religion. Or because you “sinned” and felt too guilty to ask forgiveness or return to church. Maybe you really did enjoy riotous living for a while. Or you were ill and simply had no energy for religion.

Well, this parable is not about the older brother. It isn't about our own attitude and focus on our own inheritance. We should not be identifying with the older brother. We are the younger brother. All of us. All of us were once dead in our sins. All of us were at one time lost. All of us were at one time made alive in Christ. In fact, we are constantly being made alive in Christ. When we focus on just the older brother, we lose sight of the importance of celebrating those coming to Christ. We are focusing on ourselves instead, focusing on our own life, focusing on a pity party that we aren't cool enough to be celebrated and so we turn inward. At the same time, as much as we are the younger brother, he isn't the one we are to associate with. Instead, we are to be like the father and to pursue, to run, to go forth. We aren't supposed to look inward at our own issues but outward with full abandon to welcome in those who are far from God.

But the younger brother isn't really the focus of this parable either. Today's story is the third in the series of parables Jesus taught that involved seeking and finding. The shepherd seeks the lost sheep, the woman seeks her lost coin, and the father chases after his lost son. As followers of Christ, we are to pursue the lost. We are to pursue those far from God at all costs.

So, what about the father? So often he is the focus of our attention as we examine this multi-layered parable. We know what happens these days when a child gets angry and decides to run away from home. As parents we let him get about as far away as the third house down the block and then – we run, as fast as we can, to hug him and bring

him back home. That makes perfect sense to us. However, in the first century a Middle Eastern man would never, ever run. If he were to run, he would have to hitch up his tunic so he would not trip. If he did this, it would show his bare legs. In that culture, it was humiliating and shameful for a man to show his bare legs.

So here's the question: If it was shameful for a man to run in that culture why did the father run when his son returned to him? What motivated him to shame himself? Before we answer that question, we have to understand an important first-century Jewish custom.

Kenneth Bailey, author of *The Cross and the Prodigal*, explains that if a Jewish son lost his inheritance among Gentiles, and then returned home, the community would perform a ceremony, called the *kezazah*. They would break a large pot in front of him and yell, "You are now cut off from your people!" The community would totally reject him.

So, why did the father run? He probably ran in order to get to his son *before* he entered the village. The father runs – and shames himself – in an effort to get to his son before the community gets to him, so that his son does not experience the shame and humiliation of *their* taunting and rejection. The village would have followed the running father, would have witnessed what took place at the edge of the village between father and son. After this emotional reuniting of the son with his father in our story today, it was clear that there would be no *kezazah* ceremony; there would be no rejecting this son – *despite what he has done*. The son had repented and returned to the father. The father had taken the full shame that should have fallen upon his son and clearly shown to the entire community that his son was welcome back home.

So what about God? Does God even enter into this story? Our inclination is to read the father as the image of God, welcoming home the sinners and the wayward. And perhaps this is the image that all three of the "lost and found" parables are portraying. First the shepherd finds a lost sheep, then the woman finds her lost coin. They are both

going to a great deal of trouble to find something that isn't worth very much to anyone else. Why? That's the whole point, isn't it? To God, there is no such thing as a person with no value. After each of these stories, and at the end of the Prodigal story, they all call their friends and have a party. For me one sheep or one paltry coin sounds like a pretty sorry excuse for a party. "Hey, I found a quarter! Come on over and bring some chips and salsa, and I'll make a pitcher of margaritas!"

But Jesus knows differently. Each one, *each one* is cause for celebration. The story of the Prodigal Son is about all of us, because it doesn't matter what reasons took us away from God. It only matters that God is always waiting for us to return, with open arms, without questions or recrimination. And perhaps it is the story about all of us because there will always be those who tell themselves that *they* did nothing wrong, that it isn't fair that God still loves *us*, that it isn't fair that we came home and were treated kindly. They want to believe that something is still going to be withheld from us because we were too sinful, that we ruined our lives, that we deserve to be servants instead of God's children.

I also think it's instructive to notice the difference between the Prodigal Son's attitude and the father's. The son is downcast. He tells his father that he's unworthy, that he just wants to be a servant. The father, on the other hand, is ecstatic. He puts "the best robe" and a ring on his son and shoes on his feet. He calls for a celebration, with the best food and with music and dancing. He tells his whole household to "be merry". There is not a single moment when the father thinks about the inheritance his son took or about the years he spent spending money wastefully. He isn't interested in recompense for his losses or in sorrow over sin. He doesn't ask the son to make apologies.

Not only are we forgiven, but God takes upon himself our shame. He lifts off that weight that we carry on our shoulders for our past mistakes, and willingly wipes the slate clean once again.

This parable ends without an ending. We are not told how the older brother responded to his father because the goal of the parable is that we examine what we would do. Fourth century church leader St. John Chrysostom once said: “Almost any noble person can weep with those who weep but very few of us can rejoice with those who rejoice. Very few of us can really rejoice in the salvation of another. But how happy is the man who can rejoice in the salvation of his brother, who rejoices over his brother’s repentance more than his own well-being.”

So we preachers need to stop focusing on the older brother, or the father, or even the younger son. Instead we need to focus our thinking about the mission. We need to focus on joining in the mission of God so that those who were once dead may be alive, that those who were once lost can be found. We are all Prodigals. Thanks be to God. Amen.