

Prodigal

March 27, 2022

Lost and Found

Before we read our Gospel lesson today, I'd like to draw your attention to one word that is often associated with our text. It never actually appears in this passage, and yet many of you know it as the title or heading of this story. The word is "prodigal." It's curious that we use this word, almost universally to describe this text, and yet so few of us know what it means.

Prodigal. The textbook definition of the word is "recklessly and wastefully extravagant." Wastefully extravagant. This parable is almost universally known as "The Prodigal Son," but I wanted to unpack this word with you before you hear the text today, because as you listen, I want you to be keeping an ear out for who is being extravagant, who is being lavish and reckless. I'll also note that we'll be reading the Gospel in two chunks, in order not to get ahead of ourselves.

A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Luke:15:1-3, 11b-24

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So Jesus told them this parable: There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So the father divided his property between them.

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout 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 to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up 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 like one of your hired hands.'"

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Then 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 slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

Again, who was reckless and wasteful? Surely the younger son, who asked his father for his inheritance early.

It’s interesting. In our noon Bible Study on Tuesday, folks were a lot more sympathetic toward this young man than I often hear. A phrase that pops up often these days as scripture scholars weigh in on this text is that, in asking for his inheritance early, the younger son is saying to the father, “you’re worth more to me dead than alive.”

The folks in Bible Study wanted to be more charitable toward the younger son than that, and yet, I ask you to ponder this dynamic. Imagine asking your folks for half of their estate now. We don’t know specifics about the father’s holdings, but it’s large enough that, even after being cut in half, there is enough to have servants and robes and rings and fatted calves. We don’t hear that the younger son made a case for a loan for a new business venture, or asked for help getting out from debt, or any other rationale that may have made asking for his inheritance ahead of time a little more socially acceptable. We simply hear that he asks for it, and then a few days later leaves to squander it in dissolute living.

Perhaps it’s because we know how the story ends that some want to be sympathetic, but the set up here is heartbreaking. The younger son was wasteful, prodigal, not only with his inheritance, he was wasteful with his relationship with the father, wasteful with the father’s love. The Gospel of Luke is particularly interested in lost things—lost sheep, lost coins, lost children, loss of relationship.

We’re being invited into exploring deep and painful loss, both the losses that we’ve perpetrated and those which have been perpetrated against us, to dive into the ways that we’ve been wasteful, and how that, as well as others’ wastefulness, has resulted in deep, deep pain.

How often does it feel like, because of the decisions we’ve made, we’re at a dead end, that we’ve destroyed our opportunities, burned our bridges. We even have a phrase, “there’s no going back.”

And yet, the son did go back. He rehearsed what he was going to say, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” And yet, before he is even able to get that second phrase out of his mouth, the father has embraced him and not only embraced him, the father is celebrating, celebrating that his beloved is found, is alive, is back in the fold.

Remember, my question was who was wasteful? Who was reckless? Sure, the son was reckless and wasteful. It’s important for us to sit with the gravity of the mess that the son has made for himself. But his guilt and shame is not the point of the story. Our guilt and shame is not the point of the story. This is less the story of a Prodigal Son than it is the story of a Prodigal Father.

The Father. Our Father. Your Father. Here, the story is that the father was disrespected and dishonored to the point of walking away from the relationship completely. “Give me the resources, the gifts, that you have created, without any of the connection.” And the father still celebrates his return. Lavishly. Extravagantly. Prodigally.

God celebrates your return. From wherever you’ve been. From whatever pursuits have broken you. From your time with the pigs.

Again, as our Lenten hymn this year says, “Come back to me, with all your heart. Don’t let fear keep us apart. Long have I waited for your coming home to me and living deeply our new life.”

Recently, Michael Lukens sent me the text of a sermon penned by the great German-American theologian Paul Tillich. Since we’re reflecting on wastefulness today, I’ll confess that it was Michael who first introduced me to Tillich in his honors introduction to theology class back in 1991. Let me just say that reading the sermon was much more impactful for me this year than when I was 18.

The title of the sermon is, “You Are Accepted.” In it, Tillich reflects on the dynamics of separation and alienation, both within our own psyches and at a collective level. He names that this separation and alienation stems from us being estranged from the ground of our being, that is the Divine. God. He says: “We are separated from the mystery, the depth, and the greatness of our existence.”

He goes on to say:

“Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound,” says Paul in the Letter to the Romans in which he describes the unimaginable power of separation and self-destruction within society and the individual soul. He does not say these words because sentimental interests demand a happy ending for everything tragic. He says them because they describe the most overwhelming and determining experience of his life. In the picture of Jesus as the Christ, which appeared to him at the moment of his greatest separation from (others), from himself, and God, he found himself accepted in spite of his being rejected. And when he found that he was accepted, he was able to accept himself and to be reconciled to others.

This, my friends, is the point of the story of the prodigal. Not as much about the prodigal son, though that is important for the set up. Luke 15 is much more about our prodigal father, who, though we experience separation and alienation, is eternally offering to welcome us home.

You know that’s what redemption is, right? When something is redeemed, it is brought back to its creator. The story of the prodigal celebrates that God is recklessly and extravagantly welcoming us home. Redeeming us. Watching for and celebrating our return.

And Yet Lost

But we haven’t even gotten to the second part of our Gospel. I wanted to read the scripture in two separate sections today because I feel like, all too often, folks so identify with one brother or the other, and in turn, often don’t hear both parts of the story. So, now hear Luke 15:25-32:

Now the elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.”

The elder son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Again, my question is, who was prodigal? Who was wasteful? In this second act of the parable, Jesus reminds us not to be miserly, not to be resentful, not to measure our redemption against someone else’s. We’re reminded that it’s just as easy to squander our relationship with God sitting here in the pews as it is out there. We can be estranged from God, even if we talk every day, even if we live under the same roof. And so, again, the point of the story is the father’s abundant, whole, unearned love.

Conclusion

Are you familiar with the term “mean”? Not as in “unkind” or in a mathematical sense, but as in miserly, ungenerous, stingy. So often, our instinct in the face of others’ wastefulness and lavishness and recklessness is to be mean, to hold tight. In today’s parable, Jesus invites us out of that meanness, out of being tight and bunched. Whether we are bunched up and wound tight because of what we’ve wasted and the corners we’ve painted ourselves into, or if we’re clenched and resentful in the face of others’ stories, the parable of the prodigal reminds us to unclench, to loosen up our shoulders, our fists, to breathe in God’s unbounded love, and to celebrate. There’s always a way to come back home. Praise be to God! Amen!

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