

# Full to the Brim: Prodigal Grace

## The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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March 27, 2022

Our assigned lectionary Gospel Reading for this Fourth Sunday in Lent is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. It's most often referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. A more appropriate name may be the Parable of the Two Lost Sons, or perhaps best, the Parable of the Loving Parent. Over the years, it has been termed "the pearl of the parables," and "the greatest short story ever told." It has even been summarized as "the gospel within the gospel." As I read it, see which of the three characters you relate to the most, perhaps all of them. [Read Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32.]

I've noticed over the past few years I'm incorporating more and more poetry into my sermons. Like last Sunday, I often use a poem as a summary to close a sermon. But today I'm going to start with one, primarily because given the familiarity of this parable it doesn't need a lot of explanation beforehand. I find it makes a remarkably important point in its interpretation of this parable. It's entitled, ***Kin***, by **Steve Garnaas-Holmes**, whom I often quote.

How easy it is to fall into a selfish religion,  
a faith based on what we want from God.  
One son says, "Give me my share of the property."  
The other says, "You never gave me so much as a goat."  
Neither wants their father, just his stuff.

Selfish faith wants things, not relationship.  
Both sons break their relationship, betray their kinship,  
remove themselves from the family.  
"Treat me as one of your hired hands."  
"I worked for you like a slave."

To both of them alike the father leaves his home,  
and goes out to his distant sons—  
one geographically and the other emotionally,  
but both of them having removed themselves—  
and he invites them back in...

God does not give us things,  
God gives us relationships.  
When Jesus heals people he restores them to community.

Let what you seek bring you deeper in  
to your kinship with all people, and all creation.

This parable is one of the most important and revealing passages in the Bible about the nature and character of God - and about our own nature and character. Much of the fascination lies in its ability to resonate with life experiences of so many people throughout time:

- adolescent rebellion
- alienation from family
- feeling like an outsider
- the appeal of that which is new, exotic, and foreign
- the consequences of foolish living
- the warmth of home remembered
- the experience of self-awareness and awakening
- repentance and reconciliation
- the joy of reunion
- the power of forgiveness
- dysfunctional family dynamics with sibling rivalry that can lead to one sibling's departure, and to another's indignation, bitterness, and resentment
- and, the contrast between relationships based on merit and relationships based on gracious love.

Each of these themes deserves a full sermon. And I'm sure you've heard many throughout the years dealing with one or more of these. Today, I want start with the part of the story that presents **the image of returning home**. Returning home is a familiar theme in the Bible, especially as it pertains to returning home to God. The Old Testament passage commonly read on Ash Wednesday from Joel 2:12-13, states, **"Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart... Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."**

Back in 1989, spiritual author Henri Nouwen wrote a Lenten daily devotional booklet entitled, "Returning: God's Love Calls Us Home." In his first entry he writes, "The story of the prodigal son is a story about returning – and that makes it an ideal Lenten parable." See if you can relate in some way to the following reflection from Nouwen, **"I have come to realize the need for returning over and over again. My life drifts away from God.** I have to return... My mind wanders. I have to return. Returning is a life-long struggle that is renewed each Lent."

Let's look at what it means to "leave home". The **younger son**, called the prodigal, reflects this in his rebellious, reckless behavior. That can be characterized as a kind of **outward waywardness**. Nouwen expands on that this way, "We leave home every time we deny the spiritual reality that we belong to God and that our true home is with God. We leave home every time we search outside of God to earn and win the love we so much desire. And we venture from our true home, from God, every time we say, 'I am no good. I am useless. I am worthless. I am unlovable. I am a nobody.'"

**This parable calls on us to choose between returning home or not. It also challenges us as to whether we truly understand the nature and fullness of God's grace?** You may be wondering why this sermon title includes the phrase "prodigal grace". That's because we need a fuller understanding of the definition of that word. **Prodigal, at its most basic level, means wastefully or exceedingly extravagant.** Therefore, it's not meant necessarily in any kind of sinful or immoral way. The authors of the Lenten

resource we are using this year, A Sanctified Art, call us to explore our understanding of grace in the following way.

The word "prodigal" is commonly used to describe the son who squanders his inheritance. Yet, **this parable invites us to consider how God's grace is also prodigal—extravagant, lavish, illogical.** This parable disrupts and expands our definitions of grace. Once again, grace is not earned. After wasting his resources, the younger son becomes destitute and returns home to his father, saying, "I am no longer worthy" (Luke 15:21). In response, his father welcomes him with a celebration and the fatted calf.

**Notice that the father runs out to meet his son without waiting for any explanation or even signs of remorse or repentance. The father simply extends mercy and grace on an extravagant level.**

As you know, however, this parable isn't only about one lost son. **There is another lost son.** This one, however, stayed near his father's house his entire life. **If the younger, prodigal son represents outward waywardness, the elder son can reflect what happens to us when we experience an inward waywardness.** He is eaten up inside by the resentment he feels toward his father's grace, acceptance, and forgiveness of his younger brother, who at one point calls him "this son of yours".

In this parable, **the older son**, much like the Pharisees to whom Jesus told this parable, because they complained about him eating with sinners, **can represent those in religious communities who have a problem with God's inclusive love and extravagant grace.** Not a problem, of course, when it's extended to themselves, but when God extends it to those they deem as undeserving.

This parable tells us of two children from the same parents; they grow up together yet are as different from one another as day and night. You may have experienced this phenomenon in your own family. Using more modern psychological terms, the younger, prodigal son could be labeled as a **"rebel" child**, and his older brother could be labeled as a **"model" child**. You know the type - the kind of person that does all the things that good sons and daughters are supposed to do. They do their duty, are hard-working and fulfill all their obligations. They are obedient and try with all their might to live up to the expectations of their parents or others, even themselves. A conscious effort is made, of course, to avoid obvious outward sins.

Now, don't raise your hand, but I suspect you may know some people like that. Perhaps like me you occasionally see one looking back at you in the mirror. After all, we're good Presbyterians, right?

I think that one of the most important points that Jesus wants to teach us is that **we often mistakenly associate being lost only in terms of our visible actions.** We can see the prodigal son's waywardness. His being lost is obvious – the misuse of his money, time, friends, his own body. His misbehavior was clear-cut, the consequences of which led to his misery. However, the lostness of the elder son is much harder to identify. After all, he did all the right things. But **when his outcast younger brother returns home he is unexpectedly confronted with his father's gracious compassion. And perhaps even more infuriating, his father's emotion of outright joy.** Suddenly there becomes glaringly obvious a **bitter, resentful, prideful, unkind, selfish person.** In a sermon on this parable, the Reverend James Forbes, a Presbyterian pastor, had this to say about the true

character of the elder son, "He was a moralistic, legalistic, insensitive, narrow-minded, self-righteous, holier-than-thou, Calvinistic workaholic." I guess that about sums it up.

We are told that while the elder son was working dutifully in the field he heard the sound of music and dancing, always suspicious to Puritanical types. But notice something very important that is sometimes missed in this parable. **Just as the loving father went out to the prodigal son upon his return, the father also goes out to the elder son and extends an invitation for him to come into the house and join the party, to be part of the family/community.** The elder son's reply to his father reveals the depth of his being lost. "I have worked like a slave, and have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me?" It becomes clear that **he bases his relationship with his father not on love, but on merit, on what he feels he deserves. We learn that joy and resentment cannot coexist.**

Comparing the sins of the younger prodigal son to his elder brother, without excusing either one, Nouwen asks, **"In the end, what does more damage, lust or resentment?"** He then offers this scathing observation, "There is so much resentment among the 'just' and 'righteous.' So much judgment, condemnation, and prejudice among the 'saints.' So much frozen anger among the people who are so concerned about avoiding 'sin'."

If, or perhaps when, we find ourselves in this category, then we need to return home to God just as much as the prodigal son. **We are just as much in need of God's prodigal grace. And we need to learn to celebrate when that grace is extended to others.** The Rev. Ashley DeTar Birt, in that Lenten resource, summarizes it this way:

Both sons, one wasteful and one frustrated, receive the grace of their father, and even the father (who could, but isn't explicitly said to, represent God) experiences grace in his interactions with his sons. No one earns it, but rather it is something they experience together. Once I understood this, I began to feel the grace this parable extends in my own life. There's no limit to the grace we can experience with God because God puts no limits on grace. **Our lives can be big, full, messy, complicated, imperfect, a wreck, and God's grace will still be there.** Go forth and experience God's grace [including] in the people in your life, without limits."

Amen.

Resources:

A Sanctified Art, "The Third Sunday in Lent – Full to the Brim: You Are Worthy", 2022.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Kin*, unfoldinglight.net

Jirair Tashjian, *The Christian Resource Institute*, 2004.

Brian Stoffregen, Faith Lutheran Church, Marysville, CA; CrossMarks Christian Resources, 2004.