

Hosea 11:1-9

Luke 15:1-3a, 11-32

March 31, 2019

Fourth Sunday in Lent

The Sacrament of Baptism

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE PRODIGAL FATHER

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Here are the opening sentences of Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Capital of the World."

"Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is the diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement. But this Paco, who waited on table at the Pension Luarca, had no father to forgive him, nor anything for the father to forgive."¹

Here are the opening sentences of Luke's short story, for hundreds of years known as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son."

"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 he divided the 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." (Luke 15:12-13) This son, who ended up feeding the pigs in a stranger's field in a distant country, did have a father to forgive him, and plenty for the father to forgive.

Why do you suppose this parable has been called "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," when Luke clearly begins, "There was a man who had **two** sons . . ."? To call the story "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" neglects the other two main characters, and makes the younger son the star of the show. But the older brother gets almost as much exposure in the story as his younger brother. Even so, the character who is constant throughout the whole story is the father. If word count is any indication of the focus of Luke's story, the fact that the word "father" occurs thirteen times in twenty-two verses ought to tip us off to the father's importance. In fact, the father plays such an important role in the parable, many commentaries are now referring to Luke's story as "The Parable of the Loving Father."

While the attention has usually focused on the younger son, with a passing glance at the elder brother looking in from outside, the reality is, both sons are defined by their relationships with their father. Both sons offend their father. Both sons shame their father in front of the entire community. Both sons relate to their father by calculating what they need to do to earn their father's love and favor and generosity.

The younger son thinks to himself, "If I just go home and offer to work in the fields and pay off the debt I owe my father, maybe I'll have enough to eat and eventually get back in his good graces." The elder brother thinks, "If I work hard, keep

my nose clean, obey my father, and toe the line, I'll get what's rightfully mine." Neither one of the boys counted on the father not playing by their rules!

One of the most meaningful books I have read in the last ten years is Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. In 1983, in a school office in France, Nouwen saw a poster of Rembrandt's painting of the return of the prodigal son. Here's how he describes what he saw: "I saw a man in a great red cloak tenderly touching the shoulders of a disheveled boy kneeling before him. I could not take my eyes away. I felt drawn by the intimacy between the two figures, the warm red of the man's cloak, the golden yellow of the boy's tunic, and the mysterious light engulfing them both. But, most of all, it was the hands – the old man's hands – as they touched the boy's shoulders that reached me in a place where I had never been reached before."² Three years later, Nouwen spent four hours looking at the original painting which hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia. He said, "There had been moments in which I had wondered whether the real painting might disappoint me. The opposite was true. Its grandeur and splendor made everything recede into the background and held me completely captivated. Coming here was indeed a homecoming."³

Nouwen begins his book with the parable from Luke 15, but he calls it "The Story of Two Sons and Their Father." Nouwen freely admits that he had always focused on the two sons – mainly the younger son – in his reading, study, understanding, and interpretation of the parable. However, after he saw the poster of Rembrandt's painting in his friend's office and had the chance to sit in front of the 8-foot high x 6-foot wide original painting, Nouwen realized the father is the main character in the story.

Part I is about The Younger Son, Part II The Elder Son, and Part III The Father. He describes in detail how Rembrandt portrayed the characters in the painting and makes his theological observations about the story. But, interestingly enough, the conclusion of a book entitled *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (which is the name of Rembrandt's painting) is called "Becoming the Father."

No doubt, if you're at all familiar with this parable, you have found yourself identifying with either the younger son or the elder brother – or both! But have you ever identified with the loving father? Here's what Nouwen says in his conclusion: "I am amazed at how long it has taken me to make the father the center of my attention. It was so easy to identify with the two sons. Their outer and inner waywardness is so understandable and so profoundly human that identification happens almost spontaneously as soon as the connections are pointed out. For a long time I had identified myself so fully with the younger son that it did not even occur to me that I might be more like the elder. But as soon as a friend said, 'Aren't you the elder son in the story?' it was hard to see anything else. Seemingly, we all participate to a greater or lesser degree in all the forms of human brokenness. Neither greed nor anger, neither lust nor resentment, neither frivolity nor jealousy are completely absent from any one of us. Our human brokenness can be acted out in so many ways, but there is no offense, crime, or war that does not have its seeds in our own hearts.

"But what of the father? Why pay so much attention to the sons when it is the father who is in the center and when it is the father with whom I am to identify? Why

talk so much about being like the sons when the real question is: Are you interested in being like the father? If feels somehow good to be able to say: ‘These sons are like me.’ It gives a sense of being understood. But how does it feel to say: ‘The father is like me’? Do I want to be like the father? Do I want to be not just the one who is being forgiven, but also the one who forgives; not just the one who is being welcomed home, but also the one who welcomes home; not just the one who receives compassion, but the one who offers it as well?”⁴

In other words, Nouwen asks us to think about what it means to be and do what Jesus says in his Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:36: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” Another way to say that is, “Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.” In telling the parable of the father and the two sons, Jesus isn’t making a particular point as much as he is painting a picture of who our God is and what our God is like – and our God is “The Prodigal God.”

Now, that might surprise you to hear me call God “The Prodigal God.” Maybe you grew up hearing this parable and thinking that “prodigal” means “rebellious” or “trouble-making” or something like that, based on the younger son’s reputation. But “prodigal” doesn’t mean anything like that. As an adjective, “prodigal” means “recklessly extravagant” or “yielding abundantly.” As a noun, “prodigal” means “one who spends or gives lavishly and foolishly.”

It’s fair to call the younger son “the prodigal.” After all, “he squandered his property in dissolute living.” But, when you think about what the father did for his younger son – bringing out the best robe, putting a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet, killing the fatted calf, and feeding the whole town at a big party – it’s accurate to call him “The Prodigal Father.” He spent lavishly – only the best for his son who was dead but is alive again, who was lost but is found. From the older brother’s perspective – and maybe in the eyes of the fellow townspeople – the father spent recklessly and foolishly. But the father puts it all in perspective when he tells his older son, “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.” (Luke 15:32)

Let’s don’t forget the older brother. Maybe you feel a little sorry for him, as he stands outside, looking in the window, smelling the BBQ, listening to the music. “You’ve never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends,” he complains to his father, “even though I’ve done everything I’m supposed to do.” Just imagine the love in the father’s eyes and voice, though, when he says, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” The father is generous to both sons.

The father is a prodigal, also, because he recklessly and extravagantly and abundantly makes himself vulnerable in loving his two lost sons. He gives them their freedom. They break his heart. But he stands ready to welcome them home just the same. In fact, he doesn’t just stand ready to welcome them home – he runs out to meet his younger son while he was still far off; he leaves the party and goes outside to meet his older son. It makes you wonder if the apostle Paul didn’t have this parable in mind when he wrote, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. . . . For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of

his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.”
(Romans 5:6-10)

When Nancy and I lived in Rocky Mount in the early 1980's, she gave me a very special birthday present one year. It was a print of a photograph of my father taken when he was twenty-two years old. He is dressed in his Tulane college sweater. Nancy had the photo mailed to the church so I wouldn't find it in the mail at home. She told me that when she showed it to the church secretary, Ann said, "That's a great picture of Phil. When was it taken?" Nancy said, "1942," and Ann laughed and said, "Well, he's aged very well!"

When I went to Atlanta in October for the funeral of my best friend's father, I stopped by to see my mom at her assisted living place. When I walked into her room in my suit and tie, my mom looked at me and said, "Well, hello Addley!" (That was my father's name.) She told me, "You look just like your dad!"

Maybe that's what the picture of The Prodigal Father is meant to show us – that we are called to be like our Prodigal God, who extends his grace and mercy and love in surprising and disturbing and freeing and welcoming ways.

But, it's also good news that, whether we are the younger son or the elder brother or a combination of both, we have a Prodigal Heavenly Father who loves us recklessly and extravagantly and abundantly and lavishly and maybe even foolishly. God has sent us his message: CHILD MEET ME IN JESUS CHRIST ALL IS FORGIVEN.

Unlike Paco, we have plenty for our Heavenly Father to forgive.

Praise God that, unlike Paco, we have The Prodigal Father to forgive us.

Let us pray: God of the lost, the least, and all who long for home, when we wander from your ways and waste the gifts you have given us, welcome us back, we pray, so that we may celebrate and rejoice in your presence forever; through Jesus Christ your beloved Son.

NOTES

¹Ernest Hemingway, "The Capital of the World," *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 38.

²Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1992), p. 4.

³Ibid., p. 8.

⁴Ibid., p. 122.