

Hosea 11:1-9

Luke 15: 11-32

March 7, 2021

The Sacrament of Baptism

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

**A LUKAN LENT
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.

Did you know there was a Top 12 List of Jesus' Parables? Neither did I, until I Googled "What is the most familiar parable of Jesus?" and found an article from a Jesuit magazine that ranked The Parable of the Prodigal Son at #2.¹ The same Google search produced an article from The Huffington Post from a few years ago that made the claim that "Jesus' most famous parable is probably the Good Samaritan (the only other real contender is the Prodigal Son)."²

Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons . . ." Many people could probably give you the broad outline of the story, even if they didn't include all of the details about the father and the two sons. As with many familiar and beloved Bible stories, it might be hard to hear the story in a new way. This is the seventh time I've preached on this parable from the gospel of Luke in my years at the Wallace Presbyterian Church. What is left to say about the younger brother who ran off and wasted his daddy's money in a far country? It has been noted that preachers have had plenty to say about this parable for years and years. The story is told about a preacher who preached a sixteen week sermon series on the prodigal son. After he preached his sixteenth sermon on the parable, a woman shook his hand at the door following worship and said, "I'm so sorry that poor boy ever ran away from home!"³

I learned this story in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." But remember the very first line of Jesus' story: "A certain man had **two** sons." If we ignore the elder brother (as the traditional title does), we might as well end at v. 24. Then we would have a nice, heartwarming story about an impulsive child who finally came to his senses and made his way back home. But, as is typical of Jesus' parables, there is a twist because, remember, "a certain man had **two** sons." The elder brother who stayed at home and pitched a fit outside the party adds some drama to the welcome home celebration.

But let's go back to that first line in the story — "A certain man had two sons . . . **A certain man** . . ." As we immediately find out, that "certain man" is a father. And guess what? The father is the only character in Jesus' story who shows up in each of the four scenes (1. when the father divides his property between his two sons; 2. when the younger son is off in a distant land and thinks about his father; 3. when the younger son returns home and his father runs out to meet him; and 4. when the father goes out to talk to his oldest son who is pouting at the window). For that reason, along with the

way the father relates to and treats his two sons, the story more and more is being referred to as The Parable of the Loving Father.

Actually, that's a pretty good title for this story that focuses more on the father than either of his two sons. However, the more I thought about how the father acts, the more I thought "What about calling it The Prodigal Father?" Now, prodigal is not a word many of us regularly use, except maybe to talk about this Bible story. Just a reminder: prodigal means "spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant; having or giving something on a lavish scale." Sure, the younger son was "prodigal" when he blew his inheritance on "dissolute living" and ended up envying the pigs their dinner. But how and why can the father be called "The Prodigal Father"?

Well, from the older brother's point of view, that's exactly who and what his father is — wastefully extravagant, spending money freely and recklessly. In fact, the big brother says that in his tirade outside the party: "But when this son of yours came back (notice that he can't even bring himself to say 'My brother . . .') . . . you killed the fatted calf." In other words, "Dad, what a waste of money, and on this no good son of yours!"

Let's not think about the father's resources in terms of money and material possessions. What else is the father "prodigal" with? Luke tells us throughout the story: the father agrees to his younger son's request for his early inheritance; the father was waiting for his boy to come home; the father ran and hugged him and kissed him and threw a party for him and celebrated and must have shouted at the top of his lungs, "for this son of mine was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found!"

And he treated his older son *in the very same way*: the father divided his property between *them* (which means the older brother has already gotten twice as much of the estate as his little brother); the father left the party and went outside to talk with his upset elder son; the father said, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

The father defies all social norms and expectations of his day and community from 2,000 years ago — and maybe in most communities still today. The father is "prodigal" in his love and his generosity and his welcome — to both sons! Remember, Jesus told this parable — along with the parable about the lost sheep and the lost coin — because the Pharisees and the scribes (elder sons in every sense of the word) were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:2) It kind of reminds you of the time Jesus preached in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and his neighbors were impressed and maybe even proud of their local boy made good — that is, until Jesus started preaching about how God shows mercy and grace to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Then the neighbors took him to the outskirts of town and tried to throw him off the cliff. (Luke 4:14-30)

What is it about God's prodigal grace that gets us so all fired up? Maybe it's because we are too often like the elder brother who viewed their father's love and grace as a zero-sum game (to use a modern analogy). Think about sharing a pie with someone. The bigger the other person's piece is, the smaller yours is going to be. In other words, a zero-sum game means one person can only win when the other person loses. Doesn't that sound a lot like the elder brother? He had already received twice as much inher-

itance as his little brother. He had access to everything his daddy owned. His father didn't treat him any differently than he treated his little brother. But, somehow, he felt cheated or that he had obligated his father in some way because he had stayed home, kept his nose to the grindstone, and worked hard.

John Templeton was one of the world's greatest investors, a Presbyterian elder, active in the denomination, and a board member of the American Bible Society. He established The Templeton Prize, which is the largest annual award given to an individual for an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension. He eloquently described how love is never a zero-sum game, and the same description applies to God's grace: "The more love we give away, the more we have left. The laws of love differ from the laws of arithmetic. Love hoarded dwindles, but love given grows."⁴

On this day when we celebrate the baptism of Addison Glyn Riley, we remember that a sacrament is often described as "the Word acted out." That is certainly true today as we hear about God's prodigal love, portrayed by the certain man who had two sons. Our "Directory for Worship" reminds us that "Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is at once God's gift of grace, God's means of grace, and God's call to respond to that grace. . . The baptism of our young people witnesses to the truth that God claims people in love even before they are able to respond in faith."⁵

As we come to the baptismal font this morning, remember your own baptism. Think about God's prodigal love and welcome and grace in our lives through Jesus Christ. Think about **both** of those lost boys whom their father loved so generously as I read these words from the apostle Paul about God's prodigal love: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly . . . God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6, 8)

A comment from the article about The Top Twelve Parables describes what the waters of baptism symbolize for our lives, not just when the water gets put on our head, but throughout all of life. The comment: "I immediately felt welcomed and have come to realize that our Father's love is perfectly described in the person of the father of the Prodigal Son. Not only was he ready to welcome me back, he was **waiting** for me, greeting me with unconditional love — not dismissing my absence, but celebrating my return, and fully embracing me, whether I deserved it or not!"⁶

That's who our God is . . . that's what our God does.

Thanks be to God!

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. Amen.

NOTES

¹John W. Martens, “Top Twelve Parables,” September 22, 2010 at www.americamagazine.org.

²Christian Chiakulas, “Jesus’s Most Radical Parable — Updated for the 21st Century,” June 6, 2016 at www.huffpost.com.

³Cited in Robert Dunham’s sermon “Which Comes First: Grace or Repentance?” March 14, 2010 at www.day1.org. Rev. Dunham credits: As told by Peter J. Gomes, “It’s About the Father: The Prodigal Son,” in *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2003), 236.

⁴www.templeton.org/about/sir-john

⁵Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order 2019 -2021* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019), 93.

⁶Martens.