

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV**

### **Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: March 27, 2022, Yr. C, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Title: Prodigal Grace (This is the theme from *Sanctified Art*)

Focus: In this multifaceted story, we witness the interaction among three family members which includes resentment exhibited by the older brother/son (he demonstrates no joy), disregard and then regret shown by the lost younger brother/son, and overwhelming grace demonstrated by the father.

### **Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

<sup>15</sup>Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” <sup>3</sup>So he told them this parable:

<sup>11</sup>Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>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! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>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.’ <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. <sup>25</sup>Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>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.’”

## “Top Ten” Parables?

Of all the parables or stories that Jesus told, what do you think is most familiar? Do you think there is a “Top Ten” list of most familiar parables?

We could talk and debate about it like sports fans fuss over “Who is the Greatest Of All Time (GOAT), but I think the Top Two are pretty clear:

- The Good Samaritan (I think this is the most familiar).
- This one about the father and his two sons.

Both of these have made their way from the pages of the Bible into popular culture. You’ll see references to both these stories in publications for general audiences, not just church folks. In popular culture, when someone helps someone else, like when someone stops to help a person whose car is broken down on the side of a road, they’re often called a “Good Samaritan,” as though everybody understands that reference. Just this last week, I was reading a sports story about a player returning to a team for which he had played before. He was described as a “Prodigal Son.”<sup>1</sup>

I was curious to gauge the reach of these two stories in another way—as measured by how often they have been **depicted in art over the centuries**. So, I went to the digital art library of the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University, which houses a large collection of “Art in the Christian Tradition.” There are over 7000 images in the collection--from the 1<sup>st</sup> century to the present.

When I searched for imagery of the “Good Samaritan” and “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” both searches popped up a large number of results. Interestingly, they both popped up the exact same number: 58.<sup>2</sup> That seems to me to be a large number of representations relative to the size of the collection.

We might say that these two stories are *familiar* with a broad audience, but they aren’t necessarily understood in all their complexity or facets. It’s sort of like I said last week when we were talking about the Fig Tree: We think we know the “punch line” or the ending or what it all means. We diminish the inherent complexity and ambiguity in the stories and thereby their impact.

So, as in popular culture, the “Good Samaritan” is the shorthand way of referring to this story and anyone who helps someone else is called a “Good Samaritan.” Of course, helping someone is not a bad point to draw, but that single focus filters out all the other dimensions of the story.

## What do you call this story?

At the opening of the sermon, I referred to this story as “This one about the father and his two sons.” I was intentionally not any more specific in naming it.

What is this story’s most common name? *The Prodigal Son*

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<sup>1</sup> Though I read this just this week, I didn’t take note of the title or source of the article.

<sup>2</sup> The visual images in the ACT database represent the continuum of the practice of Christianity from the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. to the present. There are currently 7147 images in the collection. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-search.pl>

Let's go with that title for now. That title alone is interesting. The adjective *prodigal* comes from the Latin verb *prodigere*, which is formed by the prefix *pro*, meaning "for" or "forth" and *agere*, which means "to set in motion" or "drive."<sup>3</sup>

The word came to mean *wasteful*, but also *lavish*. That dual meaning of *prodigal* presents us with some additional things to ponder:

Who is to say where *lavish* ends, which in a positive way suggests generosity and luxury, and where *wasteful* begins? *Wasteful* has a negative connotation, suggesting carelessness, whereas *lavish* suggests intentionality, and maybe even *hospitality*, to the degree that you invite someone else to share in it. Does that give the story a different twist to you?

And if this story is about or is called *The Prodigal*, is that meant to refer to The Wasteful, Careless Son, or is it about The Prodigal Father, who is lavish and extravagant and maybe even offensive in his generosity?

You know, of course, that if you have a bold print heading in your Bible before this story begins in Luke 15 that announces this story as "**The Prodigal Son**," that that heading or title is placed there by some Bible editors. It's not as though Jesus announced, "I'm going to tell you a story about 'The Prodigal Son.'"

This is a title or heading which editors insert. The title isn't off-base or wrong, but hearing that as a title does sort of direct us in a particular way as a summary of what it's about. Could you see yourself calling it something else? What would you call it?

- The Prodigal Son
- The Lost Son
- The *Two* Lost Sons
- The Lost Son and the Welcoming Faither
- One commenter I read suggested "The Parable of the Utterly Dysfunctional Family"
- Another said, perhaps indicating the one with whom she identified, "The Lament of the Responsible Older Child" and then called it, "The Ticked Off Older Sibling."
- Another suggested a different title and focus: "Let's Get This Party Started"

While we might have chuckled at some of these, I appreciate that they each reflect a different way of hearing and responding to the story. I don't think there's a single meaning or interpretation to offer, as if there is only one message to reach as a conclusion or that all other meanings or interpretations are wrong. I think that's the intentional richness of these stories called *parables*. That complexity and ambiguity is a part of Jesus' remarkable wisdom or effectiveness as a storyteller or teacher. This story and *these stories* as parables are not about one thing. This story is multifaceted. It's complex. It's intentionally ambiguous.

As we think about a title and draw meaning from the story, it's also important to recognize what prompted the story:

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the Online etymology dictionary. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/prodigal>

Jesus told the story in response to the Pharisees getting cranky about Jesus welcoming and eating with sinners (Luke 15:1). They were grumbling because he was hanging out with the wrong kind of people. “He should know better than to do that.”

Jesus told this story and the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin (which are in this same chapter of Luke 15 in the portion that the Lectionary omits) to talk about the joy that comes when something of value is found.

### **“The Lament of the Responsible Older Child” or “The Ticked Off Older Sibling.”**

This story is about the older son/older brother, too, isn't it? Otherwise, wouldn't Jesus have just told a story like, “There was a man who had *one* son. . .”

The seminary preaching professor who gave it the title: “The Ticked Off Older Sibling” —you hear her, don't you? You see the older brother. He was the responsible one. He was the one making “good choices.” He was the one following the rules, doing what was expected of him.

He got a raw deal, didn't he? He had to put up with his brother's “stuff” over all the years. He had to see his father disrespected and mistreated by his brother basically saying, “You're better off dead to me. I just want my money. I want it now.”

This older brother kept his head down and kept working.

And the “raw deal” that he got seemed to keep on coming. After their father ran down the road to hug and kiss the younger son, the next thing he did was summon the staff to get the best robe and put it on the younger son and begin to get ready for the big party they'd have.

You know what he *didn't* summon the staff to do? They didn't dispatch anyone to go let the older brother know. He was still working in the field! No one went to go get him! He was overlooked again. The party was already going on and he didn't find out until he approached the house and hear the commotion and flagged down someone to ask them.

Can you identify with that? No wonder he was “The Ticked Off Older Brother.”

But what was he missing? If this story is about him, too, isn't there good news for him, too?

There's a poem called “**What Doesn't Play by the Rules**” in the *Sanctified Art* devotional booklet that was written by Pastor Sarah (Are) Speed. It's a personal reflection which seems to identify with the young son/younger brother in this story, but I hear good news in her poem for the older son/brother as well. The line that got me, which prompted me to grab my highlighter and mark it and continue to think about it was

- **In a scorekeeping world, grace doesn't play by the rules.**

I think that's good news for both brothers. It's good news for the older brother because he has operated in a calculated way. Not calculated in terms of conniving or dastardly, but calculated in terms of operating so rigidly by those rules that he's

motivated more by those rules than by the richness of relationship or pleasure or joy or anything else. Whether he's aware of it or not, that orientation seems to cause him to determine that if he does *this*, like work hard day after day and year after year, then he's entitled to *that*, whatever that reward is, and that others are not. He is for sure ticked off by his brother, and he's likely ticked off his father and by this disturbing sense of unfairness.

I think Pastor Sarah is wise in calling her poem "What Doesn't Play by the Rules" because she's right that *grace* defies those rules or exists above and beyond those rules. If rules are intended to assure that you (and everyone else) get what you deserve, the upside-down thinking of grace is that you get *better* than what you deserve.

I think that there is grace for the older son/brother in this story, which is what the father seeks to assure him of at the close of the story, but the older son has somehow cut himself off from that grace that was there all along. His rigid orientation has prevented him from seeing that grace is there for him, too.

And you know what? We don't even know the rest of the story for the older brother. Having heard his father's reassurance, did he loosen up and see things in a new way and give him a hug? Did he wash up from his work and come in to join the party? Did he at least ponder this new calculation—or rather freedom from the calculations he had been making--that he, too, didn't have to earn his father's love or receive it doled out in little bits like a weekly paycheck, but that he could receive the grace that was offered? We don't know how he responded.

The father explains to his older son that because this lost family member—"this brother of yours"--has returned, "We *had* to celebrate and rejoice," suggesting that joy and love compel us to do this—we can do nothing else.

The father pointedly says "We." "*We* had to do this—we had to celebrate and rejoice," but there's no description of how the older son responded.

### **Who is *the Prodigal*?**

Let's return to a question we briefly addressed when talking about the meaning of the word *prodigal*. Is this story about the Prodigal Son, suggesting the one who is careless and wasteful, or is it about the Prodigal Father, the one who is lavish and extravagant? The father has . . .

- Granted the absurd request of his young son to have his inheritance (right now!)
  - Is *absurd* the right word? Offensive? What would you call it?
- He has provided a home for them all
- With love and longing, he has left the light on and stood on the porch day after day. . .
- Looking eagerly down the road, he finally saw his son "while he was still far off" (v. 20) and ran to hug and kiss him.

- One of the things I've noticed is that the father runs and hugs him even before the son spits out his speech about his sin and his unworthiness. The father welcomes him home before all of that.

## What's this story about?

Returning to a question (or maybe a set of questions) I posed earlier: What would you call or title this story? What's it about?

I'd like to address my own question.

As a teacher and preacher or communicator, I've been taught and have been disciplined to follow a practice in which I ask myself, "Can I say what this is about in one sentence?"<sup>4</sup>

The rationale for that approach has to do with clarity. The preacher is asking about the claim or meaning of the text—to make sure you're clear about that and then asking the same of your own message. Is my message or is my point clear?

I would challenge myself by saying to myself, "If I can't say what it means in one sentence--where *it* is the message of the text or the focus of my sermon. . . . If I can't say it in one sentence, then I can figure that my hearers couldn't say it clearly and succinctly, either.

For the sake of clear communication, I will stand by that practice as a good one.

And yet with this text, I feel like giving the story a title or a bold print heading or a sermon a particular title may have an unfortunate consequence of bypassing an important person or important element of the story. I think I would be leaving out its essential complexity.

I think I could say the story is about **grace and rejoicing or experiencing joy**, but if I were to be more specific than that I fear I would cut off an important component. As I said, I think Jesus told this story and these stories (parables) with intentional ambiguity, with complexity, with different dimensions. I can't say it's about one thing because it's about more than one thing.

It's a story about a man with two sons. It's about people with flaws. It's about the grace that they're invited to discover, and the joy that may come when they do discover that and receive it.

In this multi-faceted story, may we discover a word of grace for ourselves as well.

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<sup>4</sup> In his book *The Witness of Preaching*, Tom Long guides preachers to "State the claim of the text upon the hearers (including the preacher)" as a key step in moving from reading and reflecting to crafting the sermon. He then guides the preacher to develop a *focus statement* describing the theme of the sermon. It essentially says what the sermon is about.