

Love Story – The Parable of the Prodigal Father

Luke 15:11-32

Rev. Rick Hull ~ March 10, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹¹ Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ 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! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.’ ²² 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. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property

with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² 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 15:11-32, NRSV)

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Dear Friends, it is good to be back with you again! This morning, I want to talk to just three people – (more on that later). And I want us to enjoy together one of the greatest love stories ever told!

But, first let me respond to the one question I have heard most over the last few weeks: “*How was Ethiopia?*” It was wonderful!

Last fall, our brother Mulay gave me one of the real blessings of my ministry life: He arranged for me to be invited to teach for two weeks in January and February, at the Pentecostal Theological College of Ethiopia.

While I was there, I also preached a series of messages in the “Body of Christ Church,” and led Bible studies, and conducted a half-day ministry seminar for pastors from around Addis Ababa.

Many of you were praying for me ... my messages, and my health. And I can’t thank you enough! Your prayers were felt. And when I told my students that so many brothers and sisters here were also praying for them, they were deeply moved!

In Ethiopia, I discovered that we all shared a profound heart-to-heart link. The worship was rich, and the Holy Spirit was moving in our midst.

I had come from a place where God’s chosen are sometimes frozen – to an experience where the disciples are demonstrably dynamic – and the hearts are hungry to grow deeper in faith and broader in evangelistic outreach.

I told the “Body of Christ” church that looking out over their faces, I could immediately tell that we were quite different ... they had hair and I didn’t. But differences don’t matter when we are filled with the same Holy Spirit ... trusting our lives to the same Savior ... and finding joy in the same Lord God, who Jesus called Father. He had claimed us all, saved us all, and showered His love.

And in the words of the parable, we had each come running to Him ... and discovered Him running to us!

And then there was the surprise! The students that I thought were young and just starting out, turned out to be experienced in ways we might not imagine.

“What do you do for the Lord?” *“Well, I’m an evangelist. I have planted six local churches.”* “How long have you been doing that?” *“Thirty years.”*

“What do you hope to get from our study?” *“I want to learn to preach ... I want to learn to preach better ... I would like to transform myself and the nation ...”*

“How did you come to be here?” *“I had to escape my country ... I was jailed, and beaten, and persecuted for my faith ...”* “What do you hope to do now?” *“I want to go back onto the field and tell about Jesus.”*

There was a wonderful eagerness to learn, to grow, and to share. And there was a celebration of faith worthy of the banquet in Luke 15.

I closed our two weeks of study with prayer, and the students wept, and cried out “hallelujah” and “amen!” The faith we had shared was vital, and alive, and rich, and expressive. These were the saints who would change their world!

They were embraced in the tight, warm, healing grip of a Father who had welcomed them, and equipped them. And when He sent them back out, packed up His bags and went with them!

That is the **Father** who made us one Body across distances and differences, and who was so much more than just a doting dad. In fact, He is the one I have called “**The Prodigal Father.**”

And here’s where that name comes from. The idea of “*prodigal*” is from the adjective “prodigious.” And before it is ever used to describe a kid who squanders a huge inheritance, it means: “*extraordinary in quantity or degree ... enormous ... remarkably impressive and great in extent ...*” And I cannot think of a better way to describe the love and generosity of the Father that Jesus introduced!

Last Sunday, one of my favorite theologians called this “God’s outrageous love.” I hope you were all with us when Jeff explained the relationship between “*infinite lost*” and “*infinite love.*”

Now, there was a loving Father with two sons. **One son** sowed his wild oats, squandered his inheritance, and found himself beyond redeeming ... until he came to confess sin before his amazingly forgiving, rejoicing Father. **The other son** was equally lost in his comfortable assumption of superiority. In his own way, he too wandered in a life that was “all about me” ... and he too was loved.

But today, our focus is on the *true subject* of Jesus’ story. Frankly, the boys are just the set-up for the point Jesus wants to make.

And to see that more clearly, we need to examine the context of the passage, *and then* focus on Dad and the boys. We know that the story is all about sin and grace and redemption because of the way it is introduced. In verse 2, the text tells us that:

*“The Pharisees and the Scribes murmured, saying, ‘This man receives **sinner**s and eats with them.’”*

The “righteous” zealots are frankly offended!

Now, “sinners” is their term for the habitual, professional, and deeply sinful. For ordinary sins, you simply made a sacrifice at the temple ... or perhaps John the Baptist baptized you in the river. You did the things that allowed you to say “*I’d like to be dead to my old sin, and rise up to new righteousness.*” (Down in the water and up for a fresh start -- and they felt cleansed.)

But, the verse 2 people were branded as profound sinners by the self-righteous community. Perhaps they were unrepentant. Certainly they were not allowed into

the society of the faithful. There was no cleansing for them. They were beyond redeeming. And Jesus was supposed to support the standards of judgment and exclusion.

But He would not go along. Instead, He told about things that were desperately lost. The beloved sheep that stubbornly goes his own way in the wilderness ... and the coin, treasured like a wedding ring, that fell under the bed with the dust-bunnies. In both cases, someone lavished great attention on the work of finding, and then there is joy and celebration! In the parable of the Prodigal Father, this motif reaches its powerful climax.

So, now to the central character. What he did will forever represent the “extraordinary degree” of the saving love of God! And our appreciation of it only grows when we understand what the Father has endured. He has been insulted in the extreme.

In that culture, when the boy demands his inheritance while dad is still living, he is saying the equivalent of “*I wish you were dead.*”

He has denied the family. He has depleted the estate. And he has turned his back not only on dad, but on the local community as well (and by the way, the community knows it!).

All of Jesus’ listeners can feel the offense. But for them, it will be the actions of the Father that are the most prodigiously stunning!

Every listener knows what must happen on the day the kid returns! They know that he will never again eat at the family table. Everything now belongs to the older brother. The kid will serve as an indentured slave.

And, even as a repentant servant, he will not be welcomed by the neighbors. The village values are that tightly focused! They are just waiting for the ax to fall. He must be punished. And his Father must lead the punishment. To save face, the Father must humiliate the boy in front of the villagers. That is the nature of community life.

But the expected public haranguing never happens. The boy must trudge down the road through a gauntlet of shame. The whole village watches. And to

everyone’s shock, the father literally runs the gauntlet for him!

Take a close look at dad. He is a nobleman with flowing robes. And no robed nobleman ever runs anywhere! It is unseemly and humiliating. There is an old proverb in Jesus’ day that says: “*a man’s manner of walking tells you what he is.*”

The boy expects to grovel. He would kiss the father’s hand, or even his feet, in repentance. But he is pre-empted with the sign of welcome: **The Father *kisses him!***

Then the father tells the servants to dress the boy. They are to honor him with the father’s own robe. This absolutely assures acceptance.

And then there is the signet ring – the proof of trust from the father.

And then the sandals for his feet. Everyone knows that shoes are the sign of a free man and not a servant.

And then there is that fatted calf. This is going to be a huge (prodigious) party. A goat or a sheep would have been enough for a family dinner. But a calf will feed a whole village! Everyone will come to the party! To kill the calf and not invite the neighbors would be to insult them. And it would waste the extra meat – there are no refrigerators or “to go” boxes!

Everyone in Jesus’ audience knows that the calf represents what Kenneth Bailey called “*a joy so great that it must be celebrated in the grandest banquet imaginable!*” It is no wonder that we call Dad “prodigious”!

Jesus painted a word picture of a love that could not be stopped by the tragic disappointment of a sinful son ... of a forgiveness that was deeper than sin ... and of a divine patience that was always waiting for the day the sinner would come to his senses, and repent, and hope for healing.

And the love did not stop there! Even the ungracious behavior of the righteous stay-at-home son – the family Pharisee – could not exhaust the Father’s love and goodness. That is an extreme, prodigious, prodigal love!

For one son, the message is that there is no sin that is beyond the Father's grace and love. For the other son, the message is that you can be lost without ever leaving home ... and you, too, are loved. For both there is the love of the Father.

And we know the implications. Everyone in Jesus' crowd ... and everyone in *our crowd* ... **all of us** who hear the parable ... are by nature the kids who need the Father's love!

If we have lived in the far country, or just next door, we are the sinners for whom the Father watches, and the party waits!

So, just for a moment, let me raise a challenging question. I won't raise it invasively – but it does deserve to be asked. It is very personal ... but I'll dare to ask it. **How IS *your* spiritual life this morning?**

Perhaps your spiritual life has been almost non-existent. You're a guest when you drop in at church. But, religion has not really appealed. Yet, something inside is asking for more ... wishing that life might be deeper and richer.

Jesus reminds us that the Father understands the need of every heart ... that you can come home to the Lord who loves, forgives, and heals the heart.

Perhaps your experience is similar to the other son. For a long time, you have said that it's enough just to be spiritual (in whatever way feels right) ... and yet there is an emptiness.

Perhaps you are the one who faithfully stayed home. You have been an active church member wherever you have lived. You have spent so much time in church that you have a personal pew space. You have never missed a church dinner, or failed to contribute to a charitable cause. Maybe you've even served in leadership.

Yet, being "at home" in the religious community has not satisfied like it ought to. And, even with the faithfulness of the older son, you've wondered what God really thinks of you. And in quiet, introspective moments, you wonder if there is something more that you are missing.

Do you really meet with His approval? And if you stood before Him tonight what would He say? Might He say what the Prodigal Father said to the older son:

"I love you! But you, too, need to come home to the party I have prepared!"

There was an old evangelism style (maybe you have heard of it) that opened with the question: *"If you died tonight, are you sure you would go to heaven?"* Now, that's a reasonable question ... and one that I suspect is often secretly pondered. But, it is also an awfully brutal way to talk about the theology of grace and saving love!

And I think it is revealing that ***Jesus did not go there!*** In fact, there is no footnote connected to these three Luke 15 stories. There is *no hint* of a salvation message given here.

And when you think that the Lord God raced to earth in the incarnation of Jesus (like a Prodigal Father racing to a sinful son) ... and when you see Jesus embrace the worst of sinners, and invite them to the party ... it does seem strange that *there is no altar call* at the end of these parables.

Let me tell you why I think that is. In Luke 15, Jesus is *just introducing* the meaning of prodigious grace. He is destroying the assumption that God is the last great judgment Pharisee ... just waiting for a time to stand in angry judgment. He is countering the idea that this may be a "transactional" God – willing to negotiate blessings if we offer enough payment in the form of good works, or religious piety, or broken spirit.

In both cases, there is not enough that you and I can do to measure up to His righteous purity. And there is no way we could ever know for sure if we had done enough.

So, while Jesus does talk about prodigious grace, He does not make the invitation that we modern disciples might expect.

Why not? Let me suggest this: As powerful as this Luke 15 parable is, it is being told BEFORE Calvary happens. There is not yet a cross, a death, and a resurrection. None of what we celebrate in communion, or commit to in baptism, has happened yet. Here He simply introduces a gracious love that will *become* saving grace with His blood.

At the cross, He will throw open the doorway to our eternal home. And it is **after the cross** that you and I,

today, hear the call of God to come home. All the sins of those folks vilified in verse 2 – and all of our sin – have been taken to the cross, so that this morning we are able to preach the embrace of the Father and claim the assurance of our own forgiveness.

Jesus made it real, and He made it personal, at the cross! And so, even though the story ends abruptly in Luke 15, **the story is not finished!** But, get this, even the cross did not finish it! The empty tomb did not finish it!

The story is only completed when you and I know for sure that we have come home to Him ... come home on His terms ... to personally claim the love that was poured out for each of us at the cross.

Many of us know that love. And we celebrate it like the banqueters at the Father's party! Some of us will search our hearts for the empty spaces ... for the silent yearnings ... and discover the wonderful assurance that coming home to Him can give. For all of us there is the persistent, prodigious love of a Prodigal God.

Does your heart feel drawn to it this morning? This question is too important not to press. Perhaps you have only looked at Jesus Christ from afar. He is just for religious folks who hope for heaven, but He's not for you. And yet there is something inviting, even compelling, about Him. And when you see Him on that cross, you wonder if that actually *was* done to free you from guilt, and uncertainty about the future.

Maybe that is the Spirit of God speaking to your spirit today. If so, I want to invite you to hear His voice, and come to Him, simply saying:

"Lord, I need you. I'm not completely sure ... not fully secure about spiritual things. And, I'd like to have the assurance that I have come home to you. I'm a sinner, just like everyone else. I need your forgiving love. I want to know that I belong to the God who is the Prodigal Father."

It is as simple as a private prayer ... in the quiet of your heart.

Perhaps, you are that faithful church member. But, you've never been entirely certain that you were OK with God. Maybe you started on a wave of spiritual

enthusiasm, but it dried out. And even at home, you feel separated from the prodigal God.

Perhaps this is the moment to come home, even when you haven't left. That, too, is a private prayer ... when you open your heart and say:

"Lord God I claim the cross again for my own. Jesus, you ARE my Savior ... and now, Holy Spirit, fill me with your presence and assurance. I want a fresh ... and refreshing ... start in your love. I'm not satisfied with being just satisfied. I want to live for you in every part of my life."

Dear friends, let's not dance around the fringes of the incredible grace of God. Let's not just do theological conversations. Let's dive into the depths of the grace we saw at the cross ... and the personal, saving, healing, renewing love that is ours in Christ!

Come home today. Come home again now. The Prodigal Father is waiting with open arms just the other side of the cross.

A last thought.

My message this morning has been for three people. Some of us are coming home. Some of us are refreshing our home ties. And there are also many of us who are living each day in the strong assurance of our relationship with the living Lord.

In verse 31, I think Jesus may be speaking to all of us. Dad says to the second son, *"... all I have is yours."*

What would it mean for all the kids in His family to take this seriously? To say that now that we are home with our generous Father, there are family resources to be enjoyed and put to use ... family values to be expressed?

Is it possible that there is a very subtle challenge tucked into the end of the parable? Do we take seriously the immense resources and prodigious possibilities that are ours here in the embrace of the Father?

What would we covenant to do about all of this in the week ahead? Could Sunday morning turn into the banquet celebration that then deploys us into the work of the Father on Monday?

What a joy it would be to become the agents of prodigious love ... and welcome ... and redeeming grace ... in the next 24 hours!



Benediction: The “Parable” of the *Prodigal Sister*

(not scripture ... but worth a thought ...)

She said to her older brother,
I know where our kid brother is.
I know what he is going through.
He is sinking fast.

If we love him – like Dad does – let’s go get him.
He has no idea that he can come home.
He has no idea what is waiting for him here.
He’ll never figure out our Father’s love on his own.

Somebody needs to tell him before it is too late!
Let’s go get him!



The Next Step
A resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

1. Read the first part of the story (Luke 15:11-24).
What stands out to you from this part of the passage? Now the second part (Luke 15:25-32).
What stands out to you here?
2. The parables of Luke 15 describe Jesus’ view on the “disreputable sinners” in His community. Are there particular sinners who need to know the grace and love of God in our community? What could be done to bring them to the party?
3. How do we extend forgiving love to the “sinner” without affirming the “sin”?
4. Can you think of a time when you have repented and felt the healing forgiveness of the Lord?
5. In many traditions it is not always easy to use the word “sin” or to talk about sin. Why do you think this happens? What might we do to become more bold about this delicate subject?

6. In applying Jesus’ message, a challenging question was presented. How did it make you feel? And, what might the Holy Spirit be saying to us all today through this story?
7. In the second part of the parable, there is a sub-theme of personal selfishness to which all of us could be vulnerable. How can we address it?
8. The father in the story wants more for both sons than either can imagine ... that one will return to the family, and the other will welcome the love of the father and participate in his grace. Are there ways that our church family fellowship could extend the hope and the welcome that the father represents?

Table to Table Question
A question for kids and adults to answer together

Can you think of several ways that we show Jesus’ love to each other?