



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – November 2, 2008

Prodigal Grace

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Luke 15:1-32

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A 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. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ²⁰So 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. ²¹Then the son said to him,

‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for 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. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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.’ ”

“Who is he?” “Who is this Jesus?” they were asking. A prophet? A messiah? A savior? Not bloody likely, they grumbled. “Look, he welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Some messiah! Some savior!

It was not a crazy concern. The Pharisees were all familiar with the Jewish maxim, “I saw them eating, and I knew who they were.” If that sounds a bit archaic to your ear, then the Pharisees were almost certainly familiar with Euripides’s line from *The Phoenissae*, as well: “A man is known by the company he keeps.”

“Who is he?” “Who is this Jesus?” the Pharisees asked. “We know,” they suggested. “We know him from the company he keeps: sinners, and tax collectors, and prostitutes.”

“Who is he?” Jesus, ever the divine eavesdropper, answered them by telling them a parable - but not just

any parable. Jesus answered them by telling them the Parable of the Prodigal Son: the greatest of all His parables¹; the most beloved parable of all time²; word for word the most piercing insight into the human soul ever written. Augustine³, Aquinas⁴, Luther, Calvin⁵, Nietzsche, Freud and Jung all analyzed it. Durer⁶, Rembrandt⁷, Rubens⁸ and Murillo⁹ all painted it¹⁰. Sergei Prokofiev¹¹, Benjamin Britten¹² and Roy Acuff¹³, yes – Roy Acuff, all set it to music.

Have you ever wondered why? Have you ever wondered why these brief 21 verses have fascinated Christians and non-Christians alike for 2,000 years? Scholars have. They point to the way the parable lifts up themes of freedom and responsibility, of longing and return, of estrangement and reconciliation, of remorse and grace – all universal dynamics of life.

These are all good theories, but I have my own hunch as to why this story still touches us so deeply. The Pharisees were asking, “Who is he?” But do you see what Jesus does in this parable? Jesus tells a story that answers their question by first turning the question back on them. In this parable, Jesus is asking the Pharisees: “Who are *you*?” And of course, by the time we finish reading the parable; Jesus is asking each one of us as well, “Who are you?”

Who are you? Are you the younger brother? All of us can find the prodigal corner of our life: the corner where we've squandered some of the substance of our life, the corner where we just can't seem to square our habits or inclinations or desires with our own standards and good intentions, the corner we'd just as soon not show up on our life's resume. Each of us can remember a dark day when we felt cut off, guilt-burdened and hungering for forgiveness and reunion.

Jesus has scripted the younger brother into a dark corner of utter degradation, alienation and despair. The younger brother has cut himself off from his family, his home, his life. But Jesus has scripted him into this corner just to set the stage for the great homecoming. For all that is required to be restored to this father's love and home and life is that the younger brother "come to himself" - that he recall whose child he is. He need only turn toward home to see the father hurrying down the lane to meet him, his long robes flying and his arms outstretched with welcome and acceptance.

Who are you? Are you the older brother? The German title for the story is actually, “The Parable of the Lost Son.” At first the German title seems to point to the young wastrel, but then we get to the end of the story and realize that the younger brother has now been found. It's the prideful older brother who is stranded outside the party and in danger of being lost.

Most of us can sympathize with the older brother's frustration, for we are a people who know about working hard, about managing our resources and about playing by the rules. We can be pretty hard on folks who don't follow the rules. Just check out the glares when someone tries to go straight through the intersection of Park and Maple from the left hand lane. Most of us can find a proper, prideful corner of our life where we secretly hope that the homeless, the unstable, the unwed teen mothers, the down and outers will just keep on moving to the next train car back.

The older brother has probably been peeved from the day the younger brother slipped off, for he's been laboring in the fields supporting the father by himself since the day the runt fled. When he discovers that the father has slaughtered his calf to celebrate that scoundrel's return, it's just too much. Heck, he'd inherited, fed and cared for that calf himself! He refuses to go to the party, won't pay his respects to his father and won't even acknowledge the younger son as his brother. But who comes bounding out of the party to plead with him but the same old father, long robes flying, arms outstretched with welcome and acceptance.

Who are you? Are you the forgiving father? Most scholars think the better title for the story would be something like, “The Parable of the Father's Love.” After all, it's plainly the father who is the star of the story. The story doesn't begin, for instance, “There was a son who had a father and a brother.” The parable begins, “There was a man who had two sons.” From start to finish, this parable is a story of the father's prodigal grace.

You and I may be a somewhat reluctant to identify with the father, the God-figure in the story. But if we scan our own lives, we can probably each find a bit of the father, for we have each had our long night of waiting, worrying, listening for a car to pull back into the driveway, listening for the sounds of footfalls coming up the stairways, our anger having mellowed into

yearning for reconciliation with our child, with our spouse or with our friend.

Who are you? By now I wonder if most of us have realized that the creative genius of Jesus' story lies in the fact that we all have a bit of all three characters inside us. We each have our younger brother self, the part of our self remorseful over mistakes made and opportunities lost. And we each have our older brother self, the part of our self still condemning the failures of others, maybe still condemning our own failures, maybe still condemning our own failures most severely of all. And we each have our father self, the part of our self that still bears at least a glimmer of our creator's yearning to forgive.

And by now I wonder if most of us have realized that the transformative genius of Jesus' story lies in the unresolved tension as he draws the parable to a close. The sun has set in the western sky; the air is heavy with the aroma of beef roasting on the spit; the sounds of laughter, music, and dancing carry out from the house. Somewhere inside the younger son is still anxiously watching the door, wondering if he'll still be welcome when his father and brother return. Somewhere outside the older son's jaw is still set, his arms folded firmly across his chest. Somewhere between them the father's hands are still stretched out in invitation, his eyes still glistening with hope. The stage lights fade to black.

Who is he? Who is this Jesus who welcomes sinners and eats with them? He is the one who has come to bring resolution to this fractured, conflicted scene. He is the one who has come to bring healing and reconciliation to our fractured, conflicted world. He is the one who has come to bring integration and wholeness to our fractured, conflicted souls. Jesus knows that there can be no happy ending for this party until the brothers embrace and accept one another fully. And Jesus knows that the bridge to that reconciliation begins with their each accepting the father's forgiveness and invitation.

Who is he? Jesus is the one comes to every one of us this morning to announce the father's forgiveness and to renew our invitation to the party, the party He sets at this table every time we share in the communion feast.

If you recognized something of yourself in the prodigal son, Jesus wants a word with you this morning. Jesus wants to say to you, "My child, it doesn't matter how sin-stained and battered that corner of your life is; it doesn't matter how much life you've let slip through your fingers, you need only come to yourself, you need only remember that you are a beloved child of God, you need only take bread and cup to experience God hurrying down the lane to meet you, His long robes flying and His arms outstretched with welcome and acceptance. The party wouldn't be complete without you – without all of you."

If you recognized something of yourself in the older son, Jesus wants a word with you this morning. Jesus wants to say to you, "My child, you are no less in need of forgiveness than your brother. Your brother separated himself from your father by his dissolute living, but you have separated yourself from your father by your self-righteous judgmentalism. But it doesn't matter how prideful you have been; it doesn't matter how grimly you've condemned your own failings. You need only come to yourself; you need only remember that you are a beloved child of God. You need only take bread and cup to experience God hurrying out from the party to meet you, His long robes flying and His arms outstretched with welcome and acceptance. The party wouldn't be complete without you. Without all of you."

And if you recognized even the tiniest bit of yourself in the forgiving father, Jesus wants a word with you this morning as well. For this is the bit of you, this is the seedling within you that must grow if the party is to continue, if God's kingdom is to come. God came among us as Jesus to start this party so that all God's children, every one of us, every part of us, would be welcome home from distant lands, welcome back inside from prideful huffs.

God came amongst us as Jesus so that wherever we are lost, we might be found, wherever we are dead, we might live. And so, it's just when you let God's forgiveness flow through you that you will be the life of the party; and that the party will be the life in you.

Who is He? Who is this Jesus? We know him by the company He keeps. He is the one who welcomes even sinners and eats with them. Yes, even sinners like us. Some Messiah! Some Savior! Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

1 Compton, J.E. 1930-1031. The Prodigal's Brother. *Expository Times*, 42:287. From Anna Wierzbicka, "What Did Jesus Mean?": "The parable of the prodigal son has been rightly described as a condensed version of the Gospel as a whole: "a gospel in miniature" (Montefiore [1937]1968:525) and "Evangelium in Evangelio" 'Gospel within the Gospel' (Arndt 1956:350; Bailey 1976:206). It has also been described as the greatest of all Jesus' parables (Compton 1930-1931:287) and, indeed, "the greatest short story ever told" (Sommer 1948)."

2 Taylor, Barbara Brown, "The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family," April 17, 2006.

3 Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by FJ Sheed, Hackett Publishing, 2007: "Thy prodigal son did not charter horses or chariots or ships, or fly with wings or journey on his two feet to that far country where he wasted in luxurious living what Thou as a loving father hadst given him on his departure – loving when Thou didst give, more loving still to Thy son when he returned, all poor and stripped."

4 Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, "Of Prodigality"

5 Calvin, John, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, Luke 15:11-24.

6 Dürer, Albrecht, *The Prodigal Son*, c. 1496. Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe

7 Rembrandt, Harmenszoon van Rijn, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* oil on canvas, c. 1669, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg. See also *Rembrandt and Saskia in the Scene of the Prodigal Son in the Tavern* oil on canvas, c. 1635, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden and *The Return of the Prodigal Son* etching, 1636, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam.

8 Rubens, Pieter Pauwel, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, c. 1618. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.

9 Murillo, Bartolome Esteban, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1667-70, National Gallery of Art, Washington and *The Prodigal Son Receives His Rightful Inheritance*, no date, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

10 See also: Beham, Hans Sebald, *The Prodigal Son Wasting His Patrimony*, 1540, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Gothic Glass Painter, French, *Departure of the Prodigal Son*, c. 1210, Cathedral, Bourges. Guercino, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1619, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Hemessen, Jan Sanders van, *The Prodigal Son*, 1536, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels. Honthorst, Gerrit van, *The Prodigal Son*, 1622, Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Hooft, Willem Dirksz, *The Prodigal Son* engraving, 1630, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague. Palma Giovane, *Amusements of the*

Prodigal Son, 1595-1600, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Palma Giovane, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1595-1600, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Rosa, Salvator, *The Prodigal Son*, 1640s, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg. Unknown master, Flemish, *The Pleasures of the Prodigal Son*, c. 1600, Museo Correr, Venice.

11 Prokofiev, Sergey, *The Prodigal Son*; Symphony No. 4, 1929.

12 Britten, Benjamin, *The Prodigal Son*, 1968.

13 Acuff, Roy, "Prodigal Son", 1944.