

Sermon For Sunday March 10, 2013, Lent IV Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 "Prodigal Father"

The prodigal son. The bad boy who decided he didn't want to stay at home on the family farm. The kid who was bored and itching to go out into the world. What an idiot!

He asked his father for his inheritance ahead of time, essentially saying "you're not dying fast enough for my plans, so give me the money now", went out to see the world and experience something beyond the farm, spent all the money he had gotten on wine, women and song, realized he had made a major mistake, and came home, asking his father's forgiveness.

Yup, we know the story.

And we hear the word "prodigal," and we think that it modifies the word "son." Well, it does. It means "spending money recklessly and freely." Sure sounds like the wild boy.

I expect we know someone like this – everyone does, it seems. We may have been that boy ourselves. It's a common theme in movies and novels, and in life: we have to leave home to appreciate what we have at home, and we have to make a few mistakes along the way. We may not have done it in as dramatic a way as the bad boy in today's tale, but we recognize the urge, even as we may judge.

This kind of behavior is usually associated with a young person (or a middle-aged person, sometimes) saying "Who am I? No really...who am I?" and then the person goes out and acts in an irresponsible way to test out their perception of who they are.

Perhaps our bad boy thought "I'm not really a farmer-type. I'm a city boy. I'm a party boy. I'm a playboy. I just need to go live that life!"

So he got the cash and went to fulfill his vision of who he thought he was...until it all fell apart. And in that moment, something happened. The Gospel says "he came to himself." It's as if the veil fell from his eyes and he realized that he was not the crazy playboy city party guy...he was simply his father's son. He came to himself, and realized that he had made a mess of things, and he wanted to go home.

Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, he wanted to click his heels and say "there's no place like home."

So he went home again, not knowing quite what he would find there. He had squandered his inheritance, he had acted like an obnoxious fool, he had insulted his father, and by extension, his whole family, by abandoning them. It would serve him right if they made him lower than the lowest slave. They owed him nothing.

But what was the response when he approached his father's land? Not scorn. Not excoriation. Not a snub and the words "you are dead to me."

No, his father was as prodigal with his forgiveness as the son had been with the spending of his inheritance. It was a reckless, wildly over-the-top forgiveness, as incomprehensible and illogical in its way as the son's behavior was. He forgave the boy's rude and heartless demand for his inheritance ahead of time. He forgave the son wasting his money on profligate living, living in a manner that rendered him ritually unclean. He forgave his son

coming home with nothing to show for his adventure but pig waste under his fingernails. And this father not only forgave, but he celebrated the boy! A party!

Why? Because the boy finally came to his senses. He finally came to himself, and in coming to himself, he realized what truly mattered.

A prodigal forgiveness, beyond what any son like this one would rightfully expect for the sins he had committed.

And we think of this story of prodigal forgiveness as a marker of the new covenant that Jesus brought, a shift in mood from the Old Testament where God exacted fearful judgment on his people...

...and yet it isn't that simple.

Look at our Old Testament reading this morning. We hear the dialogue between the Lord and Joshua, as the Israelites arrive in Canaan. This is the first generation of Israelites who have no memory of Egypt. They are landed in their promised land. There is no more need for manna. They have finally and truly been released from their slavery, and God says to Joshua "Today I have rolled from you the disgrace of Egypt." Prodigal redemption from a prodigal father who loved his children despite all their murmurings, their complaints, their infidelity to him over the years of wandering. There is no love to compare to the prodigal love of such a father...

...unless we see the prodigal love that is demonstrated when the Psalmist tells his story: "Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not conceal my guilt. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.' Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin." And who is this prodigal son, this psalmist who asks the Lord's forgiveness? King David, regretting his sin of the murder of his lover's husband. Talk about reckless, prodigal squandering of the inheritance of God's blessing! And talk about the even more wildly reckless and prodigal forgiveness, spoken of in this psalm in such understated terms!

This God of the Old Testament forgives exactly as Jesus described in the parable from Luke: love trumps punishment. Forgiveness trumps recompense. Yes, God judges, but if we acknowledge our sin and ask for forgiveness, God forgives. And forgives. And forgives. The God of second chances, and third, and fourth, and fortieth.

If we have spent the previous weeks of Lent reflecting on who we are, and have seen where we have failed, where we have not lived into our promise as God's beloved children, we have the prescription for the cure here: ask for God's forgiveness. God gives it. It is as simple as that. God gives it. God sets a table for us as we come to ourselves once again, a table around which we will gather in a few minutes, a table where all of us, the prodigals of every stripe, are welcome, a table where we will be fed in ways that will help us to live into our best selves. We, too, will experience a resurrection as we join God at the table. All because of a prodigal father and his prodigal forgiveness.

Amen.