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The Good Father

Prayer for Enlightenment

O Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

This story of the Prodigal Son is one of the most popular parables in the Bible. I think it is rivaled in popularity only by the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Both of these stories are well-known in the church.

I can find some dozen songs titled "The Prodigal Son" performed by artists as diverse as The Rolling Stones and Christian performer Keith Green.

Parables continue to speak to us today.

This parable is commonly called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Have you ever looked up the definition of the word "prodigal?" When I ask others what "prodigal" means. I get answers like a returning son or a son who leaves or a son who show remorse or repentance.

Actually, "prodigal" is used to describe one as reckless, particularly in matters of money. I think a good synonym for PRODIGAL might be SPENDTHRIFT.

Frankly, I do not like the title of "The Prodigal Son."

This title focuses us on the son. This is not the focus of the story; the father is the focus. The first verse reads, "There was a man who had two sons..."

It does not begin, "There was a son who had an older brother and a father."

I think the parable might be appropriately renamed "A Father and Two Sons", or "The Good Father". This seems to more properly reflect the first lines of the parable. The parable begins with "A man had two sons." They are not referred to as "brothers" at this point. From the beginning, the important relationship is the one between each son and his father.

To help us hear afresh this story, we need to hear the outrage of the first hearers to understand better the surprise and challenge of this parable.

It is a surprise in a Middle Eastern story that the younger son speaks *first*.

He is out of his place already!

What he speaks is even more astonishing.

He is basically telling his father to "drop dead."

The son's request is unbelievable.

It is unthinkable.

It is outrageous.

A father only gives his inheritance upon his death.

The father should explode with anger at this inappropriate request.

He does not explode.

He grants a request that was completely unimaginable.

Such is the nature of the father in the story. This is a very unusual father!

Most of the first hearers of this story would have thought the father very foolish for doing such a thing. He should have exploded in anger and sent his younger son away, never again to be a part of his family.

One scholar has spent many years in the Middle East. He asked villagers what they think of this son who asks for his inheritance. The conversation always goes something like this:

Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?

NEVER!

Could anyone ever make such a request?

Impossible!

If anyone ever did, what would happen?

The father would beat him, of course!

Why?

This request means that he wants his father to die!

Yet, Luke tells us, that “the father divided his property between them.”

The younger son goes out and squanders his property in dissolute living.

The Greek words do not imply immoral behaviors, but thoughtless actions.

He is a spendthrift to be sure.

He spends money like it is going out of style.

He is reckless in how he spends his inheritance.

He is living just for the moment.

This may have worked out all right, except for the famine that he had not counted on.

In verse 16, the younger son reaches the low point.

He wishes he were a pig...At least the pigs had something to eat.

Then the young man *came to himself*. Some translations read that the Prodigal "got smart." He got smart in the sense that he now was ready to look out for himself. He had a plan. He knew that his father had many hired hands who had bread enough.

His plan is to go back home. He knows he cannot go back as a son. He will not go back as a slave. Therefore, he will go back as a hired hand – a day laborer.

The younger son proposed to be a HIRED SERVANT with his own income living independently in the village. He can maintain his pride and freedom...AND he can begin to pay back what he has lost.

He will not live at home, and not join the family. He will pay his own way. However, he must convince his father to support his plan. In short, the Prodigal's plan, is to *earn back his status – his sonship*.

He says, give me a second chance. I'll earn it back and repay you. I am not now worthy to be called your son, but I will be if you give me a chance.

Can't you just hear him practicing this speech on the long journey home?
It will be the most important speech that he has ever given.
It is a matter of life and death.

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you..."

No, no, maybe it should be, "Father, I have sinned against you and before heaven..."

No, Father is a good Jew; he will understand and want heaven before him. It should be "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you...treat me as one of your hired hands."

I wonder if it will be more effective to fall on my knees as I say this...

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you...treat me as one of your hired hands."

On and on it goes, with each step of his journey, he rehearses his speech.

Finally, we hear him give his speech to his father -- except that the father interrupts him before he is able to say his last line. I think that the timing of this interruption is significant.

In the rehearsal (vv. 18-19), he concludes his brief confession with; "treat me as one of your hired hands." But before he can say that line to his father, his father has ordered a long robe (probably the one he was wearing), a ring, sandals, and a celebration.

The ring and the sandals show that the young man's father fully accepted him as his son.

A ring was a sign of high position in the family.

Sandals showed that he was a son instead of a slave, since slaves did not usually wear sandals.

The father's response is described in a rush of verbs that move rapidly from seeing to running, embracing, and kissing. By these actions, the father gives an emotional welcome before the son speaks a word. The father does not wait for explanations, confessions, or promises. Nor is he concerned with the restoration of his own damaged honor.

Precisely in the son's speech where we would expect him to ask to be received as a hired hand, the father receives him as an honored son.

Did you notice that the father ran to the son? It is significant that the father runs to his son while he is still a long way off.

In ancient Palestine it was regarded as unbecoming -- a great loss of dignity -- for a grown man to run. Yet the father set aside all concern for propriety and runs.

Some ancient Arabic translations of this story refuse to translate this running! They avoid this because it is clear that the father here is *acting as God acts towards prodigals*. Running in public is too humiliating to attribute to a person who symbolizes God.

I also wonder if by running to meet the son while he is still at a distance also has the purpose of protecting the son from the scorn of the rest of the village, who would remember the way that he had treated his father and make their feelings known.

Palestinian villages hold a *qesasah* (cutting-off) ceremony to formally cut-off those who left (deserted) the family.

Qesasah means “to cut off.” It was a public ceremony. Villagers and relatives would bring a jar or pot full of corn and nuts and smash it open in the presence of the community. As the children gathered the corn and nuts they would say, “The younger son is cut-off”. They were saying with their actions that the community would be as likely to welcome this cut-off one as the jar and all its contents were to be reassembled. In other words, they would NEVER accept this one who is cut off.

An erring son who violated community solidarity was dealt with swiftly and severely. I think the Good Father, in running to the younger son both welcomes him home AND protects from village anger.

Further reconciliation is shown by killing the fatted calf. The whole animal would have to be eaten in a short time or the meat would spoil, so the father is expecting a large group...I think the whole village is to be invited.

This father is not planning a quiet family gathering, he is making a public gesture to proclaim his acceptance of his son so that the whole community will follow suit. All of this is done without requiring any period of testing or acts of public penance from the wayward son.

In Luke 15:32 the NIV translates the father’s words as “But we **had to** celebrate.” We **had to**. That’s an interesting way to put it. Turns out that in the original Greek this is the same phrase that gets used elsewhere in the New Testament every time we are told that “it was necessary” that Jesus die on the cross. It had to be this way, we are told over and over again. There was no other way to salvation. “It is necessary,” Jesus often said, “that the Son of Man suffer many things and then die.” It had to be this way.

But because that had to happen, now what remains is that we have to celebrate!
This too is necessary.

It was the music and dancing that offended the older son.
Here’s what I think he was thinking...

Of course, let the younger brother return home, but confessing his wrong and earning his way back into the family...Let him prove himself worthy of being part of the family again.

Of course, let the prodigal return, but to bread and water, not fatted calf;
in sackcloth, not a festival robe;
wearing ashes, not a new ring;
in tears, not in merriment;
kneeling, not dancing.

The joyful celebration in our text is presented as a model of rejoicing with heaven over repentant sinners. It is the Father who is being honored.

The restored relationships that the Father has brought about are celebrated. It is a public witness by the community, who has been invited to share in the celebration, that the Father has restored the relationship.

What would it mean for us if people knew our church as a church that throws a party whenever the lost are found?

I am certain that if we did that, there would be many church people and others joining us at the party; I am just as convinced that some would criticize us and stay away.

It with this image of dancing and partying and rejoicing that I want to leave us.

For it is in this dancing and partying and rejoicing that we celebrate the Father.

It is in this dancing and partying and celebrating that we celebrate *foundness* rooted in the Father.

Our brother has been found.

Our sister has been found.

You have been found.

I have been found.

It is in this festival of *foundness* that we celebrate one another,
we celebrate your foundness,
and we celebrate my foundness.

But mostly, we celebrate our finder,
the one who watches and waits for us,
the one who runs to us without regard to dignity,
the one who embraces us,
the one who kisses us,
the one clothes us with the finest robe,
the one who feeds us the most excellent and extravagant food,
the one starts the music and dancing and the merriment with the whole village.

It is in this running, kissing, embracing, clothing, feeding, dancing Father that we rejoice. This is the Father who finds **us**.

Thanks be to God.
Amen