

“Prodigal Love”

Sermon by Pastor Patrick Fish

Lent 4

March 30-31, 2019

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Grace and peace to you from God, our Eternal Father. Whose love for us doesn't wait. Who forgives. Who welcomes. Who embraces. Who rejoices when the lost become found. Amen.

Move 1: Blueberry

Today, we have the beloved, well-known Parable of the Prodigal Sons. Note the plurality of that title. Growing up, this story was referred to as the prodigal son with focus primarily on the youngest son.

But, through the years, I've come to realize this is a story not just about one son and his father. It's about two sons and the family dynamic that takes place when one brother returns home.

Both brothers don't respond or react well in the story. In both situations, the father meets his sons at their lowest moments.

This isn't just about the squandering and ungrateful younger son. It's also about the resentful and judgmental older son. The family dynamic is what makes this story so relatable and real.

Youngest messes up. Parent forgives. Oldest feels it's unfair. Parent helps oldest see the bigger picture.

And this whole story reminds me of one of my best friend's shining moments. My friend Gretchen went to seminary with me. She is one of the most creative, compassionate, and kind people I've ever met. She's also one of the most grounded people I know. Never has a big head. No ego. Team player. And one of the things she says helps with that is remembering a particular story that reminds her she is very human. And has lots of human moments that reveal her perpetual need for God's grace and forgiveness.

Gretchen is the oldest in her family. But, for a long time, Gretchen was an only child. For six years, Gretchen had mom and dad, grandma and grandpa all to herself. And she admits, she really liked that attention.

Well, one day her parents shared this great news that she was going to be a big sister. That they were going to have another child. A baby boy.

Gretchen's parents were expecting excitement. But that's not what happened. Gretchen started crying and told her parents she didn't want to be a big sister.

Over the next few months, six-year-old Gretchen kept trying to convince her parents they didn't need another baby. They had her. Well, finally the day came when Collin was born. He was a healthy baby. Everyone was thrilled.

Everyone except Gretchen. When they brought Collin home, Gretchen locked herself in her room and pleaded she wouldn't come out. After a while of hiding away and long conversations with her dad, she agreed to come down to see her brother.

And that magical moment happened, where Gretchen held her brother. As her parents looked on with such love, Gretchen shouted out, "Fine, we can keep him. But only if I get to call him Blueberry."

To this day, I know her brother as Blue, not Collin. The name stuck.

It had to happen on her terms. She couldn't imagine that her parents could love both her and her brother. But, crazy thing, her parents did.

Crazy thing, God's love is the same. God loves us. Fiercely and boldly. Whether we have our stuff together or not. Whether we confess or not. God's love is beyond our systems, formulas, and ways we operate in this world.

Jesus' parable points to that truth. Reveals that this is our God. Our parent. Our father.

Move 2: Hearing the story in new ways

I have shared before that, in my house, we tend to have a movie of the week. We shuffle through favorite princesses and favorite Disney movies. One week it's *Sleeping Beauty* and Aurora. Next it's Ariel from *Little Mermaid*. And each week, I'm praying we can find a new story to read at bedtime.

Well, over the last two weeks, Ellie and Maddie have been into Pocahontas. And this week I found myself struck by a phrase Pocahontas says: "The thing I love most about rivers is you cannot step in the same river twice. The river's always moving. Always changing."

This is my context these days. Dad life.

I found it interesting and poignant as I was reflecting this week on our Parable of the Prodigal. It's such a well-known parable, and that almost makes it more challenging. When we have heard a passage over and over, the question becomes: How do we keep listening? How do we remain open to new ways God is speaking through this parable? [1]

My hope is that we approach it like we would stepping in a river. Knowing we don't step in same river twice.

This is especially difficult for me because my favorite passage in scripture is Luke 15. The passage that literally changed my life is the parable of the lost sheep. I continue to come back to this passage as my guide. It is my vision forward that leads my ministry.

The parable of the prodigal is the third and final teaching story as Jesus responds to the Jewish leaders who were grumbling because Jesus was eating and welcoming sinners.

I have read and re-read this parable countless times. This week as I researched and reflected, I pondered how to read not just for what I need, but for what we, collectively, as a community, as God's people, need to hear.

Not the same ole, same ole. What new, fresh, life-giving thing is God trying to say?

This mentality is why I never re-use sermons. Once I give a sermon, I throw it out. Don't look again. Because, truthfully, I believe I am always becoming. Always growing. I am not the same person I was when I preached on this passage last. I'm different. The world is different. I'm now at St. Mark's. I now have two children. A father with Parkinson's. My life is different.

I don't pretend that what I thought of this passage once is set forever. I believe the Bible is a living document and continues to speak life in new ways that guide my life and the life of our community.

For the longest time, I have always been drawn and focused on the brothers because, for most of my life, my identity was wrapped up in being a brother.

As the oldest in my family, I related with the eldest son in the parable. I realize my tendency to be resentful. To get into tit-for-tat thinking. To get upset when life isn't fair. When I don't receive more, even though I work hard. When I don't get praised, even though I deserve it. Those tendencies live in me, as I'm sure they live in some of you, too.

This week, again, I found myself drawn to the eldest in the story. So I paused and prayed that God would help me see this passage differently.

And something kept jumping out at me: the younger son's rehearsed speech. He never gets through it with his father. He doesn't get to say it all.

The father doesn't care about the son's confession; he is just glad to have his son back.

I've always thought this was a story about resentment and repentance. The youngest son repenting of his ways and being received. The oldest son resenting his brother for receiving his father's undeserved love.

But this is not just the story of the prodigal sons; it's a story of the father's love. A love that redefines repentance. That doesn't operate in our keeping score, tit-for-tat mentality. It's prodigal love.

I want to unpack that some more.

Move 3: Scripture

As I mentioned, this parable comes after Jesus is confronted by some Jewish leaders who are grumbling at the fact that Jesus is so comfortable and cool with sinners.

“Luke isn't using sinner in the Lutheran understanding that we are all saint and sinner. Instead, it's a designation for those whose behavior has been so egregiously bad that the whole community knows about it. These people Jesus is eating and welcoming aren't people who are trying to get better. Who are occasional church goers. These are people where this hasn't happened, at least not yet.” [2]

And, yet, this is exactly who Jesus chooses to sit with. Have meals together with. He doesn't wait for them to have their stuff together. Doesn't wait for them to apologize or repent before engaging in relationship with them. Jesus embraces them fully. And in doing so, emphasizes that God will not give up on anyone. Even on those the world has deemed lost.

This is who Jesus has come for. And this is who God will continue to go after.

The parable of Prodigal Love reveals this and brings it to life through a relatable story.

It starts out with a father recklessly giving in to a son's demand. The youngest son makes an outrageous demand that his father to give him his share of the inheritance. A very rude request. The son doesn't want to wait until his father dies to receive it. He wants it now. And upon receiving that inheritance, the son bolts. Getting as much distance between him and his family as he can.

Only to squander it all. Then a famine hits, and the only job he can find is taking care of pigs. The only food he has to eat is the food he feeds to the pigs. The son hits his breaking point when he realizes the servants at his father's estate are eating better and living better than he is.

And that's when the youngest comes up with a plan. He rehearses what he will say to his father upon returning: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands” (Luke 15:18-19).

Remember that last bit of his apology speech, “Treat me like one of your hired hands.” Because when the son actually gets to give his rehearsed speech, he won't finish. And you won't hear those words.

For a long time I always viewed the son as sincerely and genuinely remorseful. Apologetic for being so ungrateful and squandering all his family's money.

Yet this week, I wondered. Was the son really sincerely sorry? Or was he desperate? At his wit's end, knowing it's the only place he can turn? Hoping he can talk his way into convincing his father to take him back?

Is the brother genuine? Is the brother scheming, hoping he can con his way back into his father's good grace? No way of knowing. [3]

But maybe it doesn't matter. Because when the younger son finally gets up the nerve to go back home, his father seems him off in a distance and runs to greet his lost son.

The father is overjoyed to be reunited with his boy.

The son tries to tell the father his rehearsed speech, but his father interrupts. Doesn't allow his son to finish. Isn't interested in his son feeling shameful or guilty. Wants his son to celebrate. Experience his embrace. Experience love.

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. The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son..."

But the father said to his servants, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet ... Let us celebrate ... for he was lost and is found!" (Luke 15:20-24)

Move 4: Repentance

In Lent, we talk a lot about repentance. Returning to the Lord. And I used to think repentance was always us turning around. Luke 15 changed that for me, and changed me in the process.

The repentance formula is you mess up, you apologize, and after doing that, then you receive grace. [4]

This makes sense. It's fair. It's how we operate.

Yet our parable for today reveals God redefining repentance. It's not us who turn around; God turns us around. We don't go after God; God goes after us.

The son comes back with a rehearsed speech, which he thinks will convince his father. But it's the experience of being embraced, the welcome, the love that changes the son.

The oldest son being invited to the party despite his resentful and hardened heart. The son being told, "All that I have is yours." Despite not having it all together. That is what changes the son.

That is the good news we need to hear today. The good news that our Father never gives up on the lost.

“God hopes we repent, learn from our messes and mistakes and love more fully. Yet, God loves us so much that God doesn’t wait until we confess to love us. God doesn’t wait until we have it all together until he forgives us. God doesn’t wait until we are genuine or sincere before he redeems us.” [5]

God comes running after us, recklessly giving us our inheritance of eternal life. Recklessly running after us and embracing us time and time again, even when we make the same mistake. Recklessly loving us and bringing us back home.

Where we have always belonged. Where we will always have a place to put our heads.

Amen.

Resources

[1] Brobst-Renaud, Amanda. “Commentary on Luke 15:1-2, 11-32,” workingpreacher.org, March 31, 2019.

[2] Lose. David. Lent 4C: “Deliberate Ambiguity. ...In the meantime: where faith meets daily life,” DavidLose.net, March 26, 2019.

[3] Lose. David. Lent 4C: “Deliberate Ambiguity.”

[4] Lose. David. Lent 4C: “Deliberate Ambiguity.”

[5] Lose. David. Lent 4C: “Deliberate Ambiguity.”

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Reflection Questions:

- *How is resentment present and prevalent in your life?*
- *Which of Jesus’ teachings challenge you and do you find hard to follow?*
- *What does repentance look like after we experience Prodigal Love?*