

Prodigal Church

The religious types, the long-standing church goers of Jesus' day were grumbling. When they met amongst themselves, I imagine they spoke with open disdain about this Jesus and the people he was hanging around with.

But in public they whispered their disapproval under hushed tones - the way kids in school spread rumors about another kid while the teacher is in the room..

Yet Jesus somehow heard the grumbling. Maybe someone took the trouble to send him a note but more than likely the gossip was strategically leaked so eventually he would get the message: **"We're watching you...and we don't approve"**.

In response, Jesus tells a story. Actually he tells three (two others come before the one we just heard)...and all of them end in **parties** whether its because a shepherd finds a lost sheep, a woman finds a lost coin, or a father finds a lost child. JOY is the only proper response when people hear the "good news"...

that God loves them,
that they are desperately missed when lost,
and they will always be welcomed back home.

Every Sunday, even Sundays in Lent, **are little parties for prodigals**, where the guests at the feast are rejoicing because God's amazing grace has saved wretches... like us. Every Sunday we confess our sins, return to God's loving embrace in Jesus, and hear the words that make us shout for JOY...

we are loved and forgiven-
we are accepted and valued-
and we are free from every power that would tell us otherwise.

Not because we deserve or earn this goodness **but simply because God gives it.**

If anyone here this morning is feeling far away from God,

if you think the things you have done
or the things you have failed to do somehow make you unable
to belong to God's family or unwelcome at God table,

then I want you to picture God running to you as the Father in the parable runs to his lost son. Tears of JOY streak his face because he sees you, his precious child, wanting to come home. You have already been made righteous. In Christ there is a new creation, everything old has passed away and see... everything has become new...including you!

If you can hear it, that is life-giving news that erupts in JOY. Can I hear an AMEN?

And we all need to hear about God's amazing and wondrous love... but that's not the end of the story Jesus told is it?. In fact this story wasn't even directed at "prodigal

Pastor Tim Koester, St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomfield NE, Lent 4C 3.10.13

daughters and sons" in need of grace. It was told to those good church people grumbling about the other kinds of people receiving that grace.

Which means there's that other brother to deal with, you know - **the party pooper**- who seems incredibly justified in his grumbling but in reality is just as separated from his father as his younger brother once was- and that may be the brother we should pay the most attention to.

What is a Father to do? He finds a child he thought was lost but in the process, loses another child who has been with him all the while.

As Jesus tells it, the father goes out and "pleads" with this older son but we never hear what those pleas are. Something I read this week got me thinking about that and I wonder if the exchange sounded something like this:

Teddy.... Teddy... come in and join the party. Your brother is home! Everyone wants to see you.

Well I don't want to see them OK? And I especially don't want to see that little brat. I don't understand all ... this! That kid shamed our family. He shamed you. He doesn't deserve a party. He deserves a good kick in the pants...

Ahhh now wait a minute. Don't you think he's endured shame as well? Don't you think he's suffered from the consequences of his actions?

I don't know dad, you tell me? Is a party with the whole neighborhood much of a consequence? Is treating him like royalty supposed to teach him a lesson?

Son you confuse the issues. I don't condone what he did. He tore this family apart when he left and it hurt me more than you will ever know. And believe it or not, he has traveled a dark road you probably never will, but he has returned home! Sure I could punish him. I could shun him but that would that heal any of the wounds we have all suffered? I had to throw this party. I love him too much to do anything else.

Well it's pretty clear which one of us you "love" isn't it?

Is that what's the matter with you? You think my love for him is greater than my love for you? You are my first born Teddy. You have always been by my side. All that I have is yours, quite literally, since I have given you even more than I gave to your brother.

And I haven't wasted a single cent of it, have I?

No you haven't Teddy but maybe you should have.

What?

You have always been so careful, so "by the book" that it's turned you into one of those 'bean counters' who keeps score about everything! I've always been proud of you son. I admire the high standards you live by but that doesn't mean you can look down on just about everybody else. It pains me to say this but

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you are the one who shames the family now. You are the son tearing my heart out and if you persist in your "self-righteousness" you are going to find yourself in the same kind of hell your brother just

*returned from. But know this: **I want you to come into the party because I love you too.** I'll walk in there with you. I'll take the blame. I'll take the shame. But please, for the love of me, set aside your judgment, forgive the past, and rejoice with us. Your brother was dead. But see...now he is alive.*

And just like that the story ends. Jesus doesn't wrap things up all nice and clean for that older brother. The ending remains open which helps us consider what it means for us today.

We are a church who has been around for a while. We are a church who takes some pride in being responsible and careful and not "prodigal". But did you know that the word 'prodigal' has its roots in the Latin word "prodigious" which means lavish? We use the word to describe the lavish living of the younger son but it could just as easily describe the lavish, overflowing, and abundant grace bestowed on both sons by the loving Father.

So here's my take away for us: Should we consider being more of a 'prodigal' church in the sense that we give with the same kind of lavishness as God has shown to us? Some of us here today may have experienced God's grace in a moment of salvation—a rescue from a life headed down the wrong road. Others of us may have experienced grace in the steady living of faithful lives day in and day out since the time we were children. Either way, we all depend upon God's grace.

The temptation is to forget that ...and then we end up grumbling about other members who are welcomed into this body and who eat from this table, (and believe me, I've heard some of it and I've uttered some of it). The words of Jesus in this parable both comfort and convict us.

There is a party going on. No one should miss out because you think you **aren't good enough** to join in and no one should miss out because you are **grumbling about people** you don't think deserve to be let in.

Because the truth is none of us deserve this party. That's what is so wondrous about God's love. And that's the reason we can be a 'prodigal' church who gives lavishly to others, especially when we think they don't deserve it. Amen.