

Prodigal Love

From the series: Images of God in the Stories of Jesus

Text: Luke 15:20

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion, and he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Luke 15:20

It is very important to name things correctly because names give us a preconception of the reality of something. The parable that we just read has been popularly known as the “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” but, actually, that is a misnomer. That is an incorrect naming.

To call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son is to put the focus on the son. Now there were two sons. But to name it the Parable of the Prodigal Son is to put the focus on the more exciting son, the one that would put a little raciness into the narrative. But it is not a story about the rascal or the rogue. It is a story about the father. And the father represents God. It is very important for us in this series of messages, in which we will be looking at the *Images of God in the Stories of Jesus*, to get the title straight.

In titling today’s sermon, I’ve saved the word *prodigal* because I looked it up in the dictionary and found that it can have a positive as well as a negative meaning. Prodigal, in the sense of the prodigal son, means wastefulness, spendthrift, a rascal, using one’s substance on that which is not necessary or important, etc. But if you keep reading you will find that *prodigal* can also mean abundance, lavish, superabundance, profuse. So, in order to name the parable, I’ll save the word prodigal, but we’ll call it *prodigal love*. It is important to get that straight because images of God in the stories Jesus told are metaphors. And it is important to get the proper focus of the story in order to be sure we catch the metaphor.

A metaphor, you will remember we said last week, is a figure of speech. The word comes from two Greek words - *meta*, which means behind or over or across, and *pherein*, which means to carry, to bear. And so a metaphor carries us across the gulf of unknowing in order that we might have some sense of that Mystery that is beyond us. In order that, in terms of things that are familiar to us, we might have

some sense of the Mystery that is always beyond our comprehension. We can only talk of God in metaphors. We can only understand God and the deepest spiritual Mysteries in terms of poetic expression, and so, in this metaphor, this parable, we have an image of God as Prodigal Love.

Jesus didn't lecture those who were complaining to him and about him. He didn't write a catechism. He didn't try to get into a rational argument. He told a story. Jesus always told stories because Jesus knew that was the only way to communicate the depth of the Mystery to which he was pointing. You can only speak of God poetically. You can only get the feel and the sense of the reality of God in an analogy, in a figure of speech, a story, a parable. He told this parable in order to image God as Prodigal Love, because God is Prodigal Love.

Isn't that good news? Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that the news that has set our tongues singing and our feet dancing? "Why, of course," you say. "Why certainly," you agree. But wait a minute. Wait a minute. Are you sure? Do you really buy that? Does that really make you feel good, comfortable? Are you at ease with that? God as Prodigal Love.

I want to tell you, it will never make it in Houston this week. The Republican Platform Committee would never come out with a platform that had at its heart the theme that God is Prodigal Love. I'll tell you, neither Bill Clinton nor George Bush could capture the White House this fall, campaigning on a plank of God's Prodigal Love as the answer to our economic ills. I'll tell you something more; there's not a national church assembly meeting this year that would ever have at the center of its mission statement, God's Prodigal Love. I'll tell you something more; even in Christ Community we might not rest totally at ease with God's Prodigal Love.

I suppose making a provocative statement like that I ought to support it. I could see you were nodding your head "yes" all too soon and all too easily when I said it's good news that God is Prodigal Love. Sure. But why did Jesus tell the story? Because the scribes and Pharisees were murmuring about the fact that the tax collectors and the sinners were coming to hear Jesus, and they were put off by the fact that Jesus was receiving them and inviting them to eat with him, which was the sign of hospitality and the acceptance of such a person.

Luke sets the story of God's Prodigal Love in the context of the murmuring of the scribes and Pharisees. And who were the scribes and the Pharisees? Well, they don't get very good press in the Gospel because they are always set over against Jesus. They are always in the adversarial position, but, as a matter of fact, in all honesty, they were the best people in town. They were the serious people. They were the religious people. They were the pillars of society. They were decent. They were honest. They were hard working. With dogged determination and dedication they kept life going and institutions intact. They were faithful. They were devout. They were seriously good people. They were like the people who are

going to fill Convention Hall in Houston this week. I mean, that describes Republicans, doesn't it?

They murmured, "Who does he think he is? Look with whom he is associating." Murmur. Does anybody murmur better than good religious people? We the upright and the uptight, don't we murmur? Aren't we always grumbling in our beard about how bad the world is and how everything is going to pot, and about our irresponsible neighbor?

Folks, the scribes and the Pharisees were the kind of people who come to worship at 10:00 on Sunday morning. Good people. But they murmured. They were offended at Jesus living and acting out what he believed to be true and that is that God is Prodigal Love. Jesus acted out what he believed God to be. Jesus was transparent. He was a picture. He was a metaphor of God. Seeing into the face of Jesus, we see into the heart of God. And what the good folk saw... They. Did. Not. Like.

You want another piece of evidence? This is still in Luke's Gospel. If you go to the fourth chapter where Jesus begins his ministry, he came to his hometown crowd, his local congregation where you would have thought they would have given him a break. Remember? He preached from the Prophet Isaiah. He proclaimed a message of liberation - sight to the blind, and hearing to the deaf, the lame to walk, the prisoners freed. And his own people were so angry they wanted to throw him over the cliff. They wanted to kill him. And it was his consistent living out of that inaugural text that earned him the wrath of the best people in town.

You want one more piece of evidence? How does the story of the Prodigal end? The story ends, not with the salty tears of the father over the son who came home, but with the faithful, obedient, hard working, dedicated, committed son who was always every day out in the back 40 plowing and hoeing and weeding. He comes home one night; he's tired; he is satisfied, feeling that he has worked hard and put in another good day's work. But, of course, his satisfaction is really riddled with resentment, because nobody really likes to be that good and that faithful all of the time. I mean if you are that good and that faithful all of the time, then you in all probability have a bit of resentment suppressed somewhere. It will inevitably pop up now and again. He said, "What's going on?" The servant says, "Your brother's home." Dark clouds. The father comes out and says, "Your brother's home, let's have a party."

"No way! That no good joust-about, who's wasted all your living?" he says to his father. Then he colored the story a little bit. He didn't know for sure what the younger son had been doing, but he knew what he would have done, if he were out there; that's part of his resentment. He said, "He was wasting your living on harlots and all that other kind of stuff, and you kill a fatted calf for him? I have slaved for you all these years and you never gave me a party." Jesus is brandishing a vivid point to those to whom he told the story in the first place, to the murmurers.

Now to come back to the question I started with. Does it really sit easy with you that God is a God of Prodigal Love? Just think about the story for a minute. The younger son gets what he can get and scrams. Breaks his father's heart. Breaks all codes of decency and honor. Enters into a self-destructive pattern of life. Finds himself in a real pinch, scratches his head and realizes the servants in his father's house are better off than he. He devises a plan. "I will arise and go to my father." He rehearses this speech: "Father, I am not worthy to be your son. I have sinned against heaven and against you." I think he meant it. I think he had attained a certain amount of proper humility. But I don't think he was changed yet. This is still just a strategy. He was going to come home. He was going to give his prepared speech. He was going to try to be one of the hired servants because he still is operating under the old principle. He thinks, "You know if the old man will give me a second chance, and I work hard enough, and I am dedicated long enough, if I follow my elder brother around long enough, maybe I can prove that there is really some good stuff in me after all. Maybe if he'll give me a second chance I can still prove myself."

So he comes home and the old man is on the rooftop. He's been up there every day since the kid left. He's been straining his eyes looking down the road, hardly seeing because he is blinded by the tears he's been shedding. And then he sees his son and almost leaps off the roof of his house. He gathers his garments around him in a way that would be considered shameful in that culture and in that day, and he begins to run down the street as no male over 30 years of age would run. He throws off proper decorum and proper behavior and doesn't care who is watching, who is witnessing this kind of shocking display of emotion. He *races*, the text says, he races to his son and his son gets the first line of his prepared speech out, only to be smothered by the arms of the father, whose salty tears flow over the son as he kisses him effusively in a prodigal manner and restores him to sonship.

That is a moving story isn't it? It is a wonderful story. The trouble is we haven't dared preach it that way in church, we haven't let the story just be. We haven't dared to just tell that story and say, "God is like that." We've always hedged a bit. I am going to quote from a sermon given by a preacher, recognized as outstanding in our tradition. It is from a sermon on this parable:

"These parables teach and depict in a pictorial form the basic message of the Bible that God is a God of grace." (Good so far.) "God forgives sinners by grace. That is, he forgives sins freely and not by merit on the part of the person who has sinned. The word grace means unmerited favor. This, of course, does not mean that God overlooks sin or that he winks at it, or that he excuses it. God forbid. He is able (listen to me now) to forgive us freely because full atonement has been made for our sin in the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on the Cross of Calvary. (I'll repeat that.) He is able to forgive us freely because full atonement has been made for our sin in

the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on the Cross of Calvary.” [Words in parenthesis spoken by Richard A. Rhem.]

This is the way you’ve had the Gospel preached to you almost all your life. The cross of Calvary, the death of the Son of God, the Atonement. Did you really find that in the story? Where did that come from?

Now this is a very fine preacher, and this very fine preacher knows full well that when one preaches one is supposed to preach the text. But he dragged the word about Calvary into this story didn’t he? It’s not in there. Jesus told a story about a son who went bad and came home and got *loved* by his father. He didn’t say anything about parole, or probation, or recrimination, or condemnation, or somebody else taking the rap for all of the grief the father had experienced. Where did it come from?

It came from Paul, of course: Paul’s reflection, after the fact, a reflection *back* on the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. All of Paul is theological reflection. The problem in the Church is that we have never let the images of God in the stories of Jesus be heard in all of their potency, in all of their power. We have not trusted these stories. We have wanted to warn folks like you that what Jesus said in a case like this is not all that there is to say. This preacher was following a principle of interpretation that is taught in our seminaries, and that is that every text of scripture has to be interpreted in light of every other text of scripture. So you preached the text, but always in the context of the whole.

Yesterday Nancy was doing some baking. Here she was up to her elbows in flour - had the rolling pin out. She starts from scratch, that girl! I mean she’s good! She’s rolling out this crust until it is beautiful and smooth. There’s not a foreign particle anywhere, nor any kind of little lump. It is absolutely flat, uniform, homogeneous. You could take a hunk of that crust any place and you would have the real ticket. That’s what we have done with the Bible in all of its rich diversity, in all of the thousands of years over which it came to expression, and all of the different contexts into which it is spoken. We have taken a rolling pin and we’ve rolled it and rolled it.

It reminds me of a soup I used to like when I was trying to lose weight. (I’ve, of course, gotten that weight down now where it is just right!) This was a soup that had all kinds of vegetables and when it was all done you couldn’t identify anything in that bland mush. You threw them into the blender and blended that thing until - well, there were carrots and onions, and celery and tomatoes, and potatoes and all of that. Sometimes I like to take a big bite out of a carrot and taste a carrot, or an onion, or a tomato or a potato. But if you get it all blended together, you can dish it out and it’s got a little bit of everything in it and it doesn’t taste like anything distinctive! And it doesn’t have any pungency or any punch.

And so in the Church we have hedged on the stories of Jesus just so you folks didn't get the wrong impression. We are afraid you might think, as the preacher said, "God might wink at sin." Or that God could just forgive us if God willed to forgive us. So we have, thank God, Paul who puts the damper on Jesus.

But now just think with me for a minute. You are parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles. Is there a child you love? Can you imagine a child you love with all your heart and soul, that child breaking your heart? A son or daughter going wrong? Can you imagine every time the telephone rang your heart skipping a beat because you hoped it was he or she? Can you imagine going to the mailbox every day just in case there might be some communication from that son or daughter? Can you imagine a son or daughter whom you loved, seeing, clear as a bell, that they were on the road to destruction and not being able to do a thing about that? Loving them. Caring. Longing. Yearning. Weeping. And one day there is a rap on the door and there they are. What would *you* do? What would *you* do?

Jesus said, "If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more your heavenly father." I think Jesus would say, "Don't drag Paul into this story. I am trying to image for you God, who in Prodigal Love simply forgives freely." It is an image of God who has to let the kid go because he will only love, and has no other plan. God who stands helpless even in the face of his "steady-Eddie" elder son who complains, saying to that elder son, "All I have is yours. You are home. Come in to the party," but can't drag him by the hair. Jesus images God as Prodigal Love who loves and loves until one finally gets close enough to him to be embraced and to experience and to be lost in the abyss of that love.

Jesus paid it all - I feel a little more comfortable - that's the kind of world *I* can operate in. Then, Dad, take me back and let me prove myself. That feels better. But it's not the Gospel, and it's not the way God does it. The old Dutch painter, Rembrandt, captured the story and the poignancy of the parable in a painting that Peter owns, that he has shown me. It is the parable of the Prodigal Son, which we have renamed now the Prodigal Lover. Peter and I are going to show you the painting. I'll be God. [laughter heard] Well I've got this beard. [Peter responds, "I get the party!"] [Dick embraces Peter and says:] This is the painting. Do you see the salty tears on the father's cheeks? All God ever wants to do is embrace his children and have them home.

You get the picture. Listen to the voice of God. "You are loved. You are home."