PRODIGAL SONS

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Luke 15:11-32

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Our three grandsons love trains—Thomas the train especially. It remains to be seen whether our four-month-old granddaughter will share this same passion.

Our grandsons love stories about trains, so I have been pressed into service in telling train stories. I created a mythical Difficult Run Train Station near our home where the boys could board Thomas and the other trains to take them to the magical land of Sodor.

There’s always trouble awaiting them in Sodor. Diesel 10, that evil, sinister engine, is forever trying to create havoc in Sodor. In every episode, the boys must thwart Diesel 10 with some heroic act. Each time they are called upon to save the day, often at the last possible moment.

Children aren’t the only ones who love stories. Adults enjoy stories also. Sit with older members of your family for any length of time and they will resort to telling stories. “Have I ever told you about the blizzard of ’51?” “Yes, dad, hundreds of times!”

Jesus was a master storyteller. He devised stories from real life situations to illustrate spiritual lessons.

Jesus’ stories are called parables. The four gospels record 40 such parables. Parables are short stories drawn from everyday life to illustrate spiritual truth. Stories help Jesus’ followers remember his teaching.

One of Jesus’ most famous parables is called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” I regard this parable as misnamed since it’s as much about the elder son as it is the younger one. Notice how Jesus introduces the parable, “There was a man who had two sons” (15:11). It ought to be called “The Parable of the Prodigal Sons,” but I’ll say more about this as we progress through the parable.

Our parable opens with the younger son requesting his share of the family estate. Asking for an inheritance while the father is still alive is a gesture of unimaginable disrespect. Yet, the father obliges. This younger son leaves home with bankroll of money in his back pocket.

This younger son proceeds to “squander his inheritance in dissolute living” (15:13). I’m not sure what is meant by “dissolute living,” but I’m certain it can’t be good. When this son blows his inheritance, he takes a
job tending pigs. This little detail would not escape the notice of a Jewish audience since pigs were considered unclean animals. It illustrates how desperate is the plight of this beleaguered son.

This is the point in the parable where this son “comes to himself” (15:17). He knows he will fare better as one of this father’s hired hands so he resolves to go home. End of Act 1!

Act 2 shifts to the father’s point of view. We read in verse 20, “While his son is still far off, his father sees him and is filled with compassion.” He runs to embrace him, no questions asked. This forlorn father must have regularly scanned the horizon in search of his wayward son.

This scene is famously depicted in Rembrandt’s painting of the Prodigal Son. This prodigal son (prodigal is a word meaning extravagant or wasteful) bows before his father in ragged garments. His robe is conspicuously absent and his head is shaved; perhaps he has spent time in prison. His well-worn sandals, especially the one that is broken, reminds us of his wanderings.

The father orders his best robe and signet ring be presented to his son. He directs his servants to prepare the fatted calf for the ensuing feast, “for this son of mine has died and is alive again, he was lost and is found” (15:24). End of Act 2!

The figure in the extreme right of Rembrandt’s painting is the father’s eldest son. Now it’s the elder son’s turn to disrespect his father. Notice his steely gaze. While the father’s hands are open and extended, his hands are tightly clasped and close to his body. It’s a posture of judgment on his father and long-lost brother.

When this older brother returns from the fields to hear the commotion, he discovers a party is well underway to celebrate the return of his derelict brother. He becomes incensed and refuses to join the festivities. He expects the host of the party, his father, to come out and appease him.

When his father appears, this eldest son explodes in torrent of angry words: “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a dog for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours [rather than “my brother”] comes back, who has devoured
your property with prostitutes, [get out the shovel!!] you kill the fatted calf for him” (15:29-30).

The father has the last word in this remarkable parable: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (15:31-32). End of Act 3 and end of story!

Jesus leaves us hanging, don’t you think? We’re left to wonder—will this elder brother join the party? Leaving us in suspense must be intentional on Jesus’ part.

Let’s back up a moment. Luke shares with us, his readers, that Jesus sits down to dinner with “tax collectors and sinners” (15:1). The religious officials, Pharisees and Scribes, take issue with Jesus’ choice of dinner guests. They can’t imagine why Jesus doesn’t hold a banquet in their honor.

Jesus knows if he comes right out and confronts the hypocrisy of these Pharisees, it will hasten his death. Instead, he goes around the barn and tells a story about their unwillingness to recognize sinners at his banquet table.

If you haven’t guessed by now, the tax collectors and sinners correspond to the younger brother in our story. The Pharisees and Scribes are represented by the elder brother in our story.

What is Jesus’ purpose in telling this parable? He takes aim at the Pharisees and their smug, self-righteous attitude. These tax collectors and sinners know themselves to be lost. These Pharisees would never admit to being lost. Both sons in our parable are lost. One knows it; one does not.

The elder brother looks fine on the outside. He is obedient, dutiful and hard-working. He says and does all the right things. But inwardly he is seething in revenge and self-preoccupation. That’s why the elder brother’s lost-ness is so dangerous, because it is so deceptive.

I identify with both sons in this story. In my youth, I was the prodigal. I left home to engage in dissolute living. Let’s just leave it at that!
I came to my senses. I opened my life to God and became a devoted Christ-follower. I have become dutiful and obedient. Today, I’m more susceptible to elder brother lost-ness. Incidentally, most churches today are full of elder brothers.

Let me illustrate how this elder-brother-mentality plays out in real life. Elder brothers have come to believe that God owes us a good life for all our efforts. We begin thinking that we are deserving of God’s love and favor. We expect there to be a payoff in the end for all our goodness.

Then pain and suffering come along to burst our spiritual bubbles. We believe God has let us down somehow. After all the good things I’ve done for you, God, certainly I deserve better treatment.

Do you resemble the elder brother in our parable? Do you become angry and bitter when things don’t go your way? Don’t I deserve a better life? Don’t you think my goodness will pay some dividend?

Pastor and author Tim Keller has written an insightful book about this parable. He calls it Prodigal God. This parable is not ultimately about a prodigal son, but a prodigal God. Since prodigal means extravagant, the Father in our story is the truly extravagant One. He is that extravagant to both sons. He runs to embrace his younger son and leaves the feast to include his older, resentful son.

For the remainder of this summer we will be examining stories of Jesus reaching out to lost people. To borrow a line from Newton’s hymn Amazing Grace, “I once was lost but now am found.” Christ has found me. He has given my life purpose and direction. Who are the people in your circle of family and friends who are similarly lost and need to know Jesus?

Rembrandt was fascinated with this prodigal son parable all his life. While most 17th century Dutch artists were painting landscapes and portraits, Rembrandt was drawing this prodigal son story like this early etching on your screen.

Rembrandt was brash and arrogant in his early years. He enjoyed considerable fame and enormous wealth. He made a lot, spent a lot and lost a lot.

The bottom fell out of Rembrandt’s life in his middle years. Three of his children died in infancy, as did his cherished wife, Saskia, after eight years of marriage. His subsequent romantic liaisons ended poorly. His
popularity sagged and his fortunes tanked. He was forced to sell his prized paintings to stave off bankruptcy.

He painted this famous prodigal son painting a year before his death. He came to his senses. He came home to God. He needed the Father’s mercy. Don’t we all?!