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Lent 4 – Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 – The Parable of the Prodigal...

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In our Gospel lesson for today, we read the parable of the prodigal... son, right? That's what we and most of the rest of the world know it as. It's one of Jesus' most famous parables, in fact maybe even one of the most famous Bible stories there is.

But yet it's one that's very often not fully understood, and I think it has to do with that term *prodigal*. We don't use that word very much in regular speech nowadays, so how would you define it? Even if you have a hard time nailing it down, you might say something along the lines of wayward, or straying, or out-of-line. But actually that term means something closer to overly – maybe even *recklessly* – extravagant. Someone who spends or gives until they have nothing left. So with that in mind, as we talk through this story, ask yourself: who is the real prodigal here?

We begin with the age-old scene of a young man wanting his freedom, wanting to live like he wants to live, without anybody else getting in his way or telling him what to do like he was some animal in a cage. So he comes to his father and asks him for his inheritance early so he can head off on his own and do his own thing.

Now maybe that's so quick and matter-of-fact that we don't catch exactly what's going on there. Basically what this young son is saying is that he has no use for his father anymore and wishes he were dead. He didn't care about his father anymore; all he cared about was his father's money and property, and when he looked at him, all he saw were dollar signs.

And in that culture, that lack of respect was a terrible, horrible affront to the father's honor. In those eastern cultures you just didn't cross the head of the household. That was a mortal sin, and normally that son should have expected his father to very literally boot him out of his house without a dime and tell him to never come back.

But just as you might expect the father to give that son what was coming to him, he says, "Okay, have it your way." This father, who had just been slapped in the face harder than ever before, gives his son what he asks for – at great personal cost to himself no less, in both money and prestige. In those days your wealth and standing in the community were mostly tied up in animals and real estate, so along with just letting his son treat him this way and not doing anything about it, this situation would have caused a serious shock to this father's public persona. But since his son asked, the father started selling cattle and property and whatever else his wealth was wrapped up in, and he gave it to his son, who just took it and took off.

Now you might think to yourself, "What is wrong with that son? How could he treat his father that way?" And of course, you're right to think that. He was so far out of line it's not even funny.

But honestly, who doesn't know someone who's treated his family like this and took off and ran to a life of wild living? Do you know anybody who flew off the rails when they felt like their family obligations were a little too suffocating? Or if you're up to speed on the modern college scene, you probably know that, as wrong as this was, it really isn't very out of the ordinary at all. And I'm willing to bet that pretty much everyone here has times in their lives when they can see themselves in the attitudes and actions of this young son. No, what's truly out of the ordinary here – what's truly *prodigal*, truly recklessly extravagant – is the father who accepted his son's blatant disrespect and rejection, and yet loved him enough to bless him anyway. That sure didn't seem like justice; and that's just the point, because it wasn't – it was undeserved love. And it's the same kind of undeserved love when our God still gives life and breath, sun and rain, health and wealth even to sinners like us and even to people who want nothing to do with him. He does it entirely out of his own goodness, and nothing more. No, it doesn't make sense, but that's just who our God is. And you can't fully understand until you've been there that it wasn't the son who was most prodigal – it was the father.

But that's only the beginning. That son went out and did exactly what you'd expect – he brought disgrace to his family by drinking, smoking, drugs, gambling, strip clubs, prostitution – who can even fully say? He was living fast and loose and wild, without a care in the world. That is, until the money dried up and the friends with it, and he took a nose dive straight to rock bottom.

You know, for a Jewish boy, it couldn't get any more degrading than getting sent to slop around in the pig sty. After all, pigs were ceremonially unclean animals to the Jews; that means God said they weren't supposed to have anything to do with them. But this guy's outlook was so dark that there was no other choice, he couldn't see any other way to get by, and he was so desperate that he wanted nothing more than to just stuff his face with pig food – pods from the carob tree, indigestible to human beings, worthless for any nutritional value – just so his stomach would feel full for a change! This was as bad as it could possibly get – this is where his sin and selfishness and *freedom* got him.

Well, it was at that point that he came to his senses. As ugly as it is to hit rock bottom sometimes, what a hidden blessing from God it can be! On his hands and knees in mud and covered in pig filth, he came to a full understanding of who he was, what he'd done, and where it had led him. He deserved this, and all of the sudden living under his father's roof didn't seem so bad anymore. After all, even the servants have food to spare! He knew he had forsaken his father, had forfeited his place as a son in the household, and cost his father too much to say in wealth and honor. But maybe if he could be like a hired person – a craftsman or tradesman working under his father and earning a wage – then he'd be able to start paying back the debt he owed. He had seen firsthand how bad life could actually be – so he set out to return to his father's house, all the while dragging his tail between his legs and rehearsing his apology for when he got there.

But he never really got a chance to use it. Now you'd probably expect the father to be standing there with his arms crossed, chin up, tapping his foot and waiting for his son to grovel – at least

that's how it'd probably work if we were in his position. But not this father. All the while this father had never given up hope of getting his son back again, so it seems like this whole time he'd been keeping one eye on the horizon to see if he could catch a glimpse. Well when that speck just barely came into view off there in the distance, by some fatherly intuition, this dignified old sage left his dignity at home and took off running to put his arms around his son again. He didn't make his son bow down. He didn't make him pay back everything he lost. He held no grudges, he just held *him*. His son was back, and that's all that mattered.

And before that son could really even get going with his speech, his father cuts him off. He says go get the best robe and ring and sandals – that is, the ones that belonged to him as the head of the household. Let's roast the fattened calf, that finest feast reserved for only the most special occasions. My son is back, and I want everyone to know that what's past is forgotten. My family is whole again, my son is fully restored, so let's throw the party of a lifetime to celebrate!

What a scene that must have been, and how surreal. That father gave everything to a son who deserved nothing. In his house was not only food to spare, but grace to spare as well. And that love teaches us even more about our God's love for us. See, our God doesn't treat us as our sins deserve, either. By grace and through faith, he blots out our debts and welcomes us into his family. In Holy Baptism, he robes us in the righteousness of Christ and gives us the ring of true sonship as heirs of his heavenly kingdom. He prepares a feast of rejoicing for us, too, forever in heaven, and gives us a little foretaste of it every time when we come to the Lord's Table for Holy Communion. Yes, God's love and forgiveness can pardon and restore any and every wrong; there is no evil that the father's love cannot cover; there is no transgression that is a match for his grace. And so in the end, it was not the son who was lost, but his sin.

So my Christian friends, let's take a lesson from this son meeting his father again for the first time. When it comes to our relationship with God, just be quiet. Just be still. Let God do the talking, because what he has to say is so much better. We can't make excuses or talk our way out of what we've done before God, but with our heavenly Father, all that is atoned for by the blood of Christ. He's paid the price, he's won our forgiveness, and so God's promises say everything that needs to be said. No matter what you've done, no matter what you do, God's grace is greater. What was dead and lost because of sin is found and alive again through faith in Jesus.

Now wouldn't we like to think that the story wraps up nicely right there? The lost son returns home and they all live happily ever after. But that's not the way it worked. The oldest son returned from the field where he had been working faithfully to find that the party had started without him. He asked what was going on, only to find that his father was throwing this lavish celebration for the one who had practically ruined their lives by his selfishness. The father tried to plead with him to come in and join them, but no – he refused to be a part of this mockery of justice. And so now he decides to take his own turn disgracing his father with this public vote of no-confidence in his father's actions. All along, he had been doing the right things. He had never strayed. He was the

good and responsible one. His father and his brother – or rather no, he wouldn't even claim him as his brother, he just says “this son of yours” – they were the ones who deserved the blame.

And it makes sense, I have to say. You can understand exactly where he's coming from, can't you? His good-for-nothing, deadbeat brother comes back, and he's the one who gets all the love and attention? That's just not how it should work, especially after the older brother spent all that time doing what he did to look out for the family. But what makes sense isn't always what's right, and that's what the father shows him. If the older brother were really looking out for the family and not just for himself, then he would have been right there to welcome his brother back. He would have added his own love and joy to his father's, and the celebration would have been that much greater. He should have known that it isn't *stuff* that matters – it's *souls*.

Here was another lost son – lost in a different way than the first, but still just as lost nonetheless. So now the father reaches out to him with that same seeking, saving grace and patience he showed to his other son. Let's celebrate and be glad, he says, because what makes a true family isn't whether everyone pulls their weight equally. What makes a true family is unconditional love, and that love means accepting back a repentant sinner even when he doesn't deserve it; it means celebrating life, rather than dwelling on death; and it means being glad that we've found him again, rather than staying upset at how we lost him in the first place.

You know, Jesus told this parable for the Pharisees and teachers of the Law in those days, because they really needed to hear that – and the truth is, it's easy for us to feel that same way. But rather than looking down on sinners and people we think should be better than they are, my friends, let's have some humility and remember the old phrase, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” Maybe you just haven't been tempted like they have. Or maybe you have, and rather than using your experience to beat them down, you can use it to help them up. And in every instance, let's remember that only by our heavenly Father's grace and mercy can any of us be faithful to God. So my brothers and sisters in Christ, let's take the middle road between these two brothers. Let's honestly admit that both are equally unworthy of salvation, and yet by God's undeserved love in Christ Jesus, both are equally welcomed to salvation – and that's the case for us now, too. Let's come to God with repentant hearts and let's welcome sinners just the same, because heaven isn't a zero sum game like that older brother thought. By God's grace, there's more than enough eternal joy and pleasure to go around, and adding sinners to salvation only multiplies them for all of us.

So is it the best we can do to call this the Parable of the Prodigal... Son? Because as I'm looking at it, I think it'd be so much better to call it the parable of the Prodigal *Father*. See, from this world's point of view, God's undeserved love that welcomes the sinner home isn't just. It's reckless. But that's exactly the point – our heavenly Father's love for us is *reckless* because it doesn't *reckon* our sins to our account, and it is extravagant because it delivers to us spiritual and eternal gifts and blessings that are beyond our wildest dreams. Now that, my brothers and sisters, gives us every reason to celebrate and be glad. Amen.