



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

4th Sunday in Lent: March 31, 2019

Sermon Title: "God's story. Our story."

Gospel Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

No story in the Bible has impacted my *life* or shaped my *ministry* more than today's Gospel, commonly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. And no story in the Bible has more formed my *understanding* of God's character and love than the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

A painting of this story hangs above my desk, to remind me and everyone who sees it, of a God whose love is deeper and more enduring than we can imagine. And when I became your senior pastor, I selected this pectoral cross to wear as a symbol for the kind shepherd I aspired to be for you – one who relentlessly points you to a savior who loves you unconditionally and unendingly. The image on this cross of a father and child embracing in loving reconciliation is directly drawn from today's Gospel. My hope is that every time you see this cross, it reminds you how much God loves you and how fervently God is calling you into a deeper and more intimate relationship.

But in a Bible full of great stories, why is *this* the one that most resonates with me? Well, no one more appreciates a cold glass of water than the person who's parched. No one appreciates a delicious meal more than the person who's starving. And no one clings as firmly to a story about God's grace than someone who has *so needed* grace in his own life. You see, this story is *my* story. It's *your* story too, because in each of our lives there are times when *we are the younger son*. Human sin leads us to self-worship, and renders us self-centered, self-indulgent, self-righteous, and so very impatient... Is there any better example of this than a son who demands his inheritance in *advance* so that he can squander it - a son who views his father's very *life* as an annoying inconvenience?

When the younger son rejected his father and stubbornly insisted on going his own way, he drove a wedge between himself and his father. The same thing happens when we decide that God, faith, and the Church are just annoying inconveniences. After all, who knows better how to run my life than me, right? But all our ambition, misplaced desire, egotism, idolatry, and selfishness eventually drives a wedge between us and God, just like in the parable. Our prayer life dries up. We find more reasons to skip worship. And we find other uses for the money we once contributed. We become estranged and distant from our neighbors too, viewing them as competitors rather than companions. The result? We become hollow, starved for real fulfillment. Our first reaction is to double down on the destructive path we've taken. "I'll work harder, play harder, and buy more things; THEN I'll feel better and more like myself." We are like the younger son who thinks that the pods intended for the pigs can satisfy that gnawing ache in his gut. But in our desert of self-worship and self-gratification, we lose who we really are.

A turning point in the parable occurs when the younger son “came to himself.” Somehow he realized that his life had become as empty as his stomach. St. Augustine famously described that feeling when he wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹ By God’s grace there is a time when all who have strayed from God have this moment of self-revelation. Maybe it’s when we hit rock bottom. Maybe it’s when we have a spiritual epiphany. It’s probably different for everyone. But at some point, we all, like the younger son, know it’s time to come home, even if doing so might carry a steep price.

This is where the story becomes scandalous, both in *Jesus’s* day and in *ours*. “While [the younger son] was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” Notice what *didn’t* happen. The father *didn’t* send armed guards to escort the son away. The father *didn’t* hide in his palace and force his son to grovel and beg for forgiveness. The father *didn’t* lecture the son and browbeat him with all the things the son had done wrong. And the father *didn’t* offer a list of terms and conditions the son would have to meet in order to be readmitted into the family. Instead, the father, overwhelmed with love and happiness at the mere *sight* of his son, ran across the fields to embrace that son and to welcome him back home.

Has there ever been a time in your life that you’ve felt so far away from God that you wondered how you’d ever find God again? I have. The good news in this parable is that *God finds us*. God relentlessly scans the horizon for us, and that same God will race across time and eternity to embrace us and welcome us home even before we can speak a word. That reconciliation sets off a celebration in the heavens – a celebration in which our God and all the angels rejoice.²

The great 20th century writer and theologian Henri Nouwen wrote that, “Jesus’s whole life and preaching had only one aim: to reveal this inexhaustible, unlimited motherly and fatherly love of his God and to show the way to let that love guide every part of our daily lives.”³ In a nutshell, that’s the message of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Who wouldn’t cling to a God like that? Well, the older son, for one. We get that, don’t we? *Prodigal* means wasteful and reckless. We don’t like it when the younger son is prodigal with the father’s resources, and we are just as offended when God is prodigal with forgiveness, mercy, grace, and reconciliation. It seems too easy. It should hurt a lot more, right?

It’s so much easier to be a *receiver* of grace and reconciliation than it is to be a *giver* of grace and reconciliation. We embrace the mercy extended to the younger son when *we* are in need of it, but often we are miserly with that mercy when invited to extend it to others. You see, if at times we are all the *younger son*, than just as frequently *we are the older son too*. We want to extract a price from the one who crossed us or who we think offended God. At least let there be a little groveling and public humiliation, right? Sure, at least when it’s someone other than us. And so we rush to condemn, objectify, and dehumanize the offender, as we complain about “that awful child of yours, God!” But God, like the Father in the parable, gracefully steps away from the heavenly celebration and races once again to our side, to remind us that God’s love for “that brother or sister” of ours doesn’t threaten or reduce God’s love for us. God loves *each* of us –

and so God, who has been reconciled to *us*, calls us to be reconciled to *one another*. Because in God's eyes, the heavenly celebration isn't complete until *all* of us are present.

Can you see now why this story is so important to *me*, and why I hope it's important to *you*? This is *God's* story. It's *our* story too. When we are like the *younger son* and have lost our way and drifted from God, this parable reminds us of the inexhaustible love God has for us. We are never beyond the boundaries of God's willingness to forgive and reconcile. *If this is you, come home. You are loved.*

And when we are like the *older son* and become overconfident in our own righteousness and stingy with love and mercy, this parable reminds us that to be truly good and Godly, we must be prodigal, extravagant, and maybe even reckless with the forgiveness we extend, the mercy we grant, and the love we share with our neighbor. Is God calling you today to reconcile with someone in your life? Because in this broken and polarized world of ours, emulating the father's boundless love and desire for reconciliation is the very best hope we have for a taste of heaven on earth.

Amen.

Cited Sources:

¹ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I.

² Luke 15:10

³ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, (1992, 2016), pp. 126-127.