

There was a Man Who had Two Sons

There was a man who had two sons. We have heard this story many times before. I would say that the Prodigal Son is arguably one of the best known of Jesus' parables.

It's the story of two sons, one who is the older and dedicated son and the younger, life-loving, irrepressible, yet irresponsible son. The younger son demands his inheritance and in short order squanders it on what would once have been called "wine, women and song".

He tries to find work and he ends up as a farm worker, so hungry he wants to eat the pods he's meant to feed to pigs. His lament begins that his father's workers have more than enough to eat and he's approaching starvation because all his money is gone. He decides his best course of action is to go home.

While he's walking home he's rehearsing what he's going to say, disheveled, dirty, hungry and disheartened. He's going to throw himself at his father's mercy, and will work as a slave until such time as he can return to his father's favour. Suddenly his father sees him and comes running.

Weeping, he throws his arms around his son who is in the process of giving his speech, except he doesn't get to finish it, because his father hasn't really been listening. He calls for the best robe, a ring, sandals, and the fatted calf to be killed. There will be a feast as the one who was thought lost has been found.

Now, the older brother has heard the fuss from afar and upon inquiring learns that his younger brother has, in fact, returned home, tail between his legs.

When he learns that not only has his younger brother been allowed to return, but has returned to his father's favour he is miffed, to say the least. He's so angry that he refuses to go into the celebration. His father comes out of the celebration and begs his elder son to come to the party.

The older son steadfastly refuses to go in because he cannot understand why there is a party for his reprobate younger brother when there has never been a celebration of any kind for him and his friends. The father again begs the son to come to the party.

And the story ends. In my humble opinion, the end of the story is a let-down. Does the older brother attend the party? Does the younger brother approach the older brother? Does the father stay out with the older brother or return to the younger brother? So many questions...because it's a parable.

For many years when I read this parable I always identified with the older brother and his, for lack of a better word, righteous indignation. His younger brother has demanded the inheritance and then frittered it away stupidly. I thought he was quite within his rights to refuse to attend the party.

As an aside the word prodigal means "spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant."

We easily see how this relates to the younger son. Spending both money and resources on newfound friends who are only friends as long as the money holds out...then they are dust in the wind.

I'm not sure if you're aware but when the younger son demanded his inheritance it was a very unusual thing to ask. Inheritances are generally only awarded after the benefactor's death. The laws of the time stated that the older son would receive two thirds of the estate, the younger son receiving one third. If there had been daughters they would not have received anything.

So the younger brother takes his one third of the estate and leaves. He is taking what is rightfully his, many years earlier than he should have. He is leaving the farm, and also the family. His plan is never to return.

Thus, the older brother is concerned that if the younger brother should return, he would again be eligible for a third of the estate. No wonder he's so angry when the younger son comes back, destitute and is lovingly and fully reinstated to the family. He's given the best robe. A party is thrown in his honour and he is given a ring.

The giving of the ring is very important. It would have contained the family crest and been made in such a way that it would be used as a seal on legal documents. The older brother would have one as well as the father. Not only was he welcomed back into the family, he was again part of the family business and family estate.

No wonder the older son is annoyed. His work seems to have been taken for granted, that he has never taken a wrong step and his work is not rewarded in the same way the younger son's reappearance has been. He confronts his father "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave 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 came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

This son of yours – he's so angry he cannot call his brother by name. He cannot even mention his relationship to him!

The one character that gets overlooked is the father. He has two sons whom he loves very much. Like all parents he loves his children the same. He loves them unconditionally and would move heaven and earth for either of them.

When his youngest son demanded his inheritance, he didn't have to give it to him, yet he did. He also gave his older son his inheritance. "So he divided his property between them." The younger son receives $\frac{1}{3}$ of the estate, the older son receives $\frac{2}{3}$ of the estate.

Now, remember that definition of prodigal "spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant." What if we look at the father's love as prodigal, in that he was wastefully extravagant with both sons.

The older son continues to work at the farm as he understands that the estate, as it is, now belongs to him. While outward appearances, he continues to work for his father. In fact, he is working for himself.

The younger son leaves and doing so he breaks his father's heart. In demanding the share of the estate that is his, he is leaving the family, never to return. Or so everyone thought.

What if we see God's love for us and all humanity as wastefully extravagant. If our God is prodigal in this way, should we not also strive to be the same? Instead of being stingy with our love and affection, we, instead, lavish it with abandon, as though it comes from a limitless place, a bottomless well.

Would this not be the very best kind of love? Prodigal love?

The older son is understandably angry, furious even, and perhaps even feels betrayed. Yet as he is not a parent he cannot understand his father's delight at seeing his youngest son alive and back home.

The father's reaction to seeing the younger son is one I would imagine we would see from God, should we stray from the family. There was a time in my life when I was angry with the world and could not see God's place in it. My understanding of God was naive and juvenile at the time.

And so I turned away from God. "I got this, if I need you, I'll let you know" and I walked away. I never stopped believing, but refused to call myself a Christian or even a follower of Jesus.

At times of great stress and tragedy I would pray and in praying I would feel calmer and more connected. After repeating this exercise a few times, I thought that if prayer in difficult times brought me closer to the divine, what would it feel like to be in prayer all the time? When times were good as well as when times were bad?

I learned first-hand the prodigal love of God. While I had turned my back to God, and not called upon God unless I needed something (I know, selfish) God had never turned from me. God simply waited with more patience than I will ever know, for me to come back.

The father of these two sons hoped that they would always be with him. He wanted to grow old and leave the farm to them to work together.

His youngest son wanted to seek his fortune in the city and because of his love for his children, the father divided the estate for both sons and let his youngest go. While he knew he would likely never see his youngest son again, he hoped fervently that one day he would return home.

His oldest son worked the land as though it were his own and was a devoted and faithful child. He didn't ask for anything and yet always received his father's favour.

When the youngest son returned the father was overjoyed because the one whom he had thought was gone for good had returned. His heart was overjoyed.

His oldest son was furious! All of a sudden he's refusing to speak his brother's name or even acknowledge that he has a brother. He's upset because he was never given a party. He doesn't understand that this is not a party. This is a resurrection celebration! One is nothing like the other.

Parables don't have to wrap up into neat bows...because they are parables. They are not true stories, nor are they even based on facts. Rather they are to teach lessons in indirect ways.

As I age I identify with the father more than either of the sons. While I have not given birth, I have raised children who were mine by marriage. I loved them the same, and wanted nothing but the best for them. There were times when I frustrated them and they frustrated me. And there were times when I was disowned.

When you hear this story, which one are you?

Are you the younger son, who wants to strike out seeking fame and fortune?
Are you the older son, responsible and trustworthy who often gets shafted?
Are you the father who loves his children equally and deeply?
Are you God, who lavishes love in a prodigal way..."spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant."

I know I'm not the only one to shudder at the use of the word wasteful. We were all taught that it was not good to be wasteful, especially when it came to food on your plate. There were starving children somewhere in the world that would love to eat what we had been presented with. Right?

Wasteful extravagance is not about disregard of cost, rather it is the extravagance of a limitless supply of something. In most parts of Canada we take for granted that we can turn on the tap and what comes out is clean and clear, safe to drink. A seemingly never-ending supply within easy reach.

Much more so is God's love. There is so much of it that if we were to ask for our share every single day we would never be able to appreciate just how much that would be.

More than a never-ending stream of water.

More than an endless feast of our favourite meal.

More than an endless supply of hugs from our favourite person.

More than an endless bath with water that never gets cold.

More than an endless cup of tea that never gets cold.

More than an endless tumbler of Bushmills that never gets warm.

And so, with everything that is happening in the world. The non stop chaos and violence that surrounds us every time we see, read or hear the news, let us respond with wasteful extravagance of patience and love.

Love for our family, friends and family of choice. Love for our neighbours. And yes, even love for our enemies...especially love for our enemies.

From these lips to God's ears we pray,
AMEN

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry
Christ Church Anglican & Fernie Knox United Church

Sermon for Lent IV - 27 March 2022 - Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32