

The parable known to us as "The Prodigal Son"

NRS **Luke 15:1** Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ So he told them this parable:

NRS **Luke 15:11** Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-- the best one-- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² 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.'"

In an era of "Game of Thrones" and Netflix, 1950's movies seem pretty tame and puritanical, though as I have shared before, my first exposure to our Gospel story — well, at least to its name — came through posters for a movie named "The Prodigal" that included women in what were essentially bikini tops and long, leg-revealing skirts. I never did see the movie, only the previews, but I guess it must have featured a scene to show a wild party attended by the one we call "The Prodigal Son." I did not know at that time — I was in sixth or seventh grade, I believe — from where the name of the movie had come; I did not know it came from the Bible, from today's Gospel lesson, in which Jesus tells the celebrated parable we by tradition call by that name.

“. . . from the Bible,” so please forgive me for indulging for a moment in one of my truly favorite things to do, an excursion into Bible study. What we have in the Bible is a real gift, and I need to preface by saying that the Bible is neither inerrant nor always consistent, and, if inspired, still inspired into human beings who are capable of not getting quite right what they have written down, which is to say, not always literally accurate or true. But the Bible is indeed our *best* way of getting to know God through Jesus, the Son of God. And the Bible is a tremendous gift that we can appreciate much better with the expenditure of more effort than a passive listening to the reading of a Scripture lesson during worship.

In the most basic of terms, as most of you know, we divide the Bible into two parts which we call “The Old Testament” and “The New Testament.” “The Old Testament,” which is the Hebrew Bible, essentially but not exactly the Bible Jesus would have known, means *the old covenant* or *the old promise*, though I think *original covenant* or *original promise* would be more accurate, meaning the covenants God made with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and through Moses at Sinai and during the Exodus, which gave rise to the people we know first as *the Israelites* but also, and then later, as *the Jews*. Jesus was a Jew — and I would say in a real sense, *we, too, are Jews*.

And of course, we meet Jesus, the Son of God, in the *New Testament* where, indeed, we encounter a *new promise* or *new covenant*, that of forgiveness of sins and eternal life. We encounter that new promise when we meet Jesus in what we know as *The Gospels*, those four works that may or may not actually have been written by individuals with the names we assign to them, *Matthew, Mark, Luke* and *John*. And as I frequently remind us, the first three of these versions are very similar — and thus called the *synoptic* (seen together) *gospels*, with the works Luke and Matthew being about seventy-five percent composed of what is in Mark, about fifteen or so percent composed of material hypothesized as being in a document lost to history which those of us who think it must have existed refer to as “Q” for a German word, *quelle*, and the balance of Matthew’s and Luke’s being material unique to those two different works.

The unique material in Luke includes, among a few other items, our traditional "born-in-a-manger" Christmas material, the post-Easter "Road to Emmaus" story, and two magnificent parables: "The good Samaritan" and "The prodigal son."

And I think these parables are unrivaled in their depth and breadth of meaning, but today we are concerned only with the latter.

And as a quick note, aside from what is considered a continuation of the Gospel according to Luke we know as "The Acts of the Apostles," most of the non-Gospel pages of the New Testament are what are known as *Epistles*, letters, letters by volume and importance dominated by those written by a man named *Paul*, undoubtedly the most important person not named "Jesus" for the spread of Christianity starting about twenty-some years after Jesus' death. *Paul's letters were written before the Gospel versions were written*, and in sort of the theological pinnacle of Paul's letters, the Book of Romans, Paul, who expects the imminent return of Jesus, deals with the question of what will happen to those Jews who have not become followers of Jesus by that time, and Paul essentially says that Jesus' life and death and resurrection *do not negate* God's promises made to the Jews in that "Old Testament" the promises made through God's covenants with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and through Moses at Sinai and during the Exodus, *even if* those Jews did not and do not accept Jesus,

Again, Paul's letters were written *before* the Gospel versions were written, and one thing that I want to say about the parable "The Prodigal Son," is that it suggests Paul's influence. I say this because I believe that *in part*, though the core of the parable of the "Prodigal Son" is about how forgiving is God and how happy when a sinner repents, "The Prodigal Son" is also an allegory about how the story of Jesus' life and death and resurrection *do not* negate God's promises made to the Jews through God's covenants with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

Why do I point to this? Because *if*, and it is a reasonably large "if" because we do not actually know the names of the writers of the Gospels, if the writer of Luke is indeed a

man named Luke whom this writer identifies in the Book of Acts as having traveled with the Apostle Paul, I feel very comfortable in saying that for one purpose for which the gospel versions were written, to convince Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, the older son in the parable represents the Jews — note the father's words to the older son! Trust me, that is what Paul was saying in Romans: God keeps the promises God has made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and through Moses at Sinai and during the Exodus, just as the Father will keep his promise to the older son.

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But beyond that, or perhaps included in that parallel between the older son and the Jews, and I do not mean this in any way as anti-Jewish, I want in a moment to focus on our *not wanting* to be like that older son!

In its most obvious and clearly intended sense, the parable is about how, though we might go astray, as did the younger son, we never lose the love of the forgiving God who created us, and who rejoices in our repentance, our returning to the fold, so to speak. *That* is the central message of "The Prodigal Son": when we turn to God in humility and honesty that we have erred, that we have sinned, God indeed forgives us and welcomes us back into God's embrace. The "father" in the parable is indeed meant to represent God.

But there has to be a reason Jesus as described by the writer of Luke presents us with the third character, the older son, in the story, I believe, other than as a mere cipher and more than as a proxy for Jews who do not accept Jesus. But if we are not only the sinning younger son who asks for the father's forgiveness, but also the older son who takes for granted the father's generosity, what message is there for us?

And I think the answer is: *Don't just stand there; do something! Don't just wait around for "the Day of the Lord," for when you realize the promise of eternal life; grab it now!*

And what I mean is simply this: saying that we know we are promised a heavenly home by God does not mean we are *not* to venture forth into the world and do something —

we are to go and do something, to use that *grace* God gives us. Not to go and spend the grace that God has bestowed upon us with indifference, without purpose, but to spend it, which is to say, to use our energies and gifts in ways that show that we are indeed grateful and want to do something on behalf of others, on behalf of Christ's Church or through Christ's Church, something or things that help others to appreciate how generous indeed is the Father who has forgiven the errors of our prodigal ways and embraces us when we return to Him.

I am not too old to fail at times to . . . well, not too old to be guilty of sin; I hope that all of you share good enough health that you might say the same about yourselves. Which is not to applaud that we are guilty of sin, but to say that the parable of the Prodigal Son still speaks to us, still speaks to the younger son within us who turns away but is constantly welcomed back by a generous and loving father. For that is how God accepts us.

But we are also, most of us, at the stage in life where, though we remain sinners, we feel somewhat self-righteous; we are convinced that "the world" — as it has always been — "is going to hell in a hand-basket," or so we observe as "older sons."

But if that is the case, let us not stand around and complain; the parable speaks to us, as well: *be grateful, be grateful for what a loving Father has promised to us*, and then, driven not by greed nor ambition nor fear but by gratitude, let us go and tell the world of that loving Father, and not just tell them, but show them as we let them see the presence within us of the Son of God, Jesus, for whose teaching in this parable we give thanks as both young bucks and old grouches, as younger sons and as older sons — uh, and as daughters.

And in His name. Amen.