

St. Matthew's Church

NEW YORK CITY

THE PRODIGAL GOD

Luke 15:11-31

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2010

This is a Parable concerning a man with two sons. While verses 11-24 describe the younger of the two, verses 25-31 deal with the older brother. The purpose of the Parable is to show that God's love stands ready to restore the lowest sinner who will repent and return to the Father's house. I cherish the words of A.W. Tozer in his book "Knowledge of the Holy." It is one of the greatest descriptions of God's love: "Because God is *self-existent*, His love had no beginning; because He is *eternal*, His love can have no end; because He is *infinite*, it has no limit; because He is *holy*, it is the quintessence of all spotless purity; because he is *immense*, His love in an incomprehensibly vast, bottomless, shoreless sea.

"As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him" (Psalm 103:13). Most people can relate to that. This is precisely why the Lord has given us this remarkable tale in Luke 15, the story we commonly call the Parable of the Prodigal Son; because a story illustrating love in the most fundamental of relationships will readily be understood by all. The parable could be called "The Parable of the Prodigal God" because the word *prodigal* means "extremely generous or lavish," and the story is primarily about the lavishness of God's love. But the parable also gives us a unique opportunity to take our own spiritual temperature by observing how we relate to God's extravagant love through the characters of the two brothers. Where we stand depends on how well we are able to step into the skin of first the younger brother and then the older.

The Younger Brother: Sick of Home: The story begins with a young man who wanted to break away from the nest. Like thousands before and after, he had his "reasons" and was not shy about expressing them. Perhaps, he wanted to be on his own or his own man. He longed for a life where he could get up when he wanted to, go where he wanted to, and return when he pleased. Life at home was claustrophobic.

All of this is a familiar story, isn't it? Maybe even more relevant today after a couple of dark decades where the culture of victim-hood has been so finely tuned. In any event, he asked for his portion of the family estate, and the father saw that further argument was useless, gave his young son his inheritance. The Old Testament indicates that where there are two brothers, the elder should receive two-thirds and the younger one-third of their father's estate (Deuteronomy 21:17). It is not unusual for a man to divide his property between his sons prior to his death. Although, knowing full well what the boy had in mind. To observers, the father's decision was crazy. But he knew this was the only way his son would learn; if he ever would. So they parted; the father stooped in sadness, the young man feeling very smart and self-satisfied, his hot blood racing. He went down the road, singing like Frank Sinatra; "I did it my way."

The Prodigal Life: So he "set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living." A new wardrobe and only the best; the young man had "taste." At least that is what everyone told him and he was surprised at how everyone adored him. People continually sought his company. The prodigal life was great! He could buy anything, and with new pleasures, came deeper degradation. There were times when he thought of home, but only as a passing thought.

Misery: One day the prodigal found himself with an empty purse and an empty soul. Then came famine, and Jesus' explicit description of what happened must have made his Jewish hearers wince: "So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country." In Jewish thinking, this young prodigal had "hit bottom," a horrible humiliation for a Jew to be day laborer, the very lowest of servants. His master "sent him to his fields to feed swine"; an unspeakable degradation for a Hebrew. Verse 16 frames the picture: "He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything." Just a few months before, everybody loved him. They said he had class. He was like a star rising in the heavens. Now no one would even give him a hush to chew on. He had sought freedom and thought he had found it, but now he was in virtual slavery.

At this point he was homesick. *"When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son: make me like one of your hired men."* What a change! He had

come to personify the opening lines of the Sermon on the Mount: poverty of spirit, mourning over sin, meekness, and desperate spiritual hunger.

His change of mind was not just because he was miserable; he was driven by unrelenting memories of home. He longed to be with his father. He had forgotten much, but he had not forgotten his father's love. He reasoned that it was better to be a lowly servant in his father's house than to remain where he was.

The Father: The father had been daily scanning the horizon for his lost son. One powerful sentence tells the whole story: *“So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and fill with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”* And immediately he was “filled with compassion.” That is he was so overcome that he had a physical reaction (his whole body ached and thrilled a once), and he “ran” (a very undignified thing for an old man) and literally “threw his arms around him and kissed him” again and again and again (as the Greek tense demands).

The son than blurted out his well-rehearsed confession: *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”* But his father cut him off before he could finish and cried out, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” Then “they began to celebrate.” The father had his servants bring out “the best robe;” a long, stately garment that reached to the feet; the kind worn by kings. Then a ring was thrust on the returned son's finger; symbolic of sonship. And finally new sandals were strapped to his callused feet. The father's slaves went barefoot; not his sons!

Just for a moment let me point out that the real prodigal is the father, representing our heavenly Father, God himself. This is the Parable of the Prodigal God, who is infinite. He is a consuming fire! But when we turn to Him, he is a God who comes running; to lavish his love upon us. This is the gospel; the good news of a prodigal God who rushes to meet sinners with his love. No one is beyond his love. You cannot do anything that will keep Him from kissing you and bestowing upon you the robe, the ring, and the sandals. Utter forgiveness is the only kind God gives. The joy of the party described here is no exaggeration.

The Elder Brother: As the Elder Brother came in he heard the unaccustomed sound of dancing and music. He summoned one of the servants, who of course told him the great news: “Your brother has come,” he replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.” Rather than joining in the party, the elder brother was “angry.” The word used here carries the idea of swelling, settled anger that rises like sap in a tree on a hot day. He was boiling. He absolutely “refused to go in.” His father came out to him and encouraged him again and again to share the celebration, but the older son finally exploded. *“Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.”*

What does all this mean? It is possible for us elder brothers to leave the Father without leaving the farm. The young son had been far from the father (in a distant country) because of *sins of passion*. But the elder son was separated from his father through *sins of attitude*. He was even farther away than his younger brother and he had not even left the farm. Rather than sharing his father’s wide-ranging affection, he cared only about himself. Inside he resented the current situation. “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you.” Somehow in his thinking his father was a stern taskmaster. The elder brother was judgmental. He was too convinced of his own goodness, too attached to his own hardships, to understand his own brother. Self-righteous, he overstated his performance: “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.” He was convinced of his own goodness, and this assurance made improvement impossible.

Elder brothers are lethal. Imagine what would have happened if he had encountered his returning brother first. “So, you’ve come back? Things didn’t work out like you thought? Too bad! Listen, little brother, you aren’t welcome here. You broke your poor father’s heart. You’ve disgraced us all. You’ve only come back because your money has run out. If you still had some cash, you’d still be gone. At least have enough self-respect to come back when you have a job and get yourself cleaned up.” All of us wonder how older brothers get this way. It is very easy to forget what we were like before we came to the Father. “Good people” who have avoided sins of passion; and all the while sins of attitude run rampant within us. We do not regard our jealousy, pride, and judgmentalism as sins. Our surface familiarity with holy things has rendered them dull, insipid, and bring.

Closing Thoughts: Our story closes with the elder son standing face to face with his father, fists clenched, mouth twitching with uncontrolled rage. The father answers, “My son (literally, “My child”), you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.” Then he repeated the language of his heart: “But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

This is the Parable of the Prodigal God; the lavishly loving God. Now those impersonal metaphors take on flesh.

O the deep, deep love of Jesus,
Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!
Rolling as a mighty ocean
In its fullness over me.

“Because He is immense, His love is an incomprehensibly vast, bottomless, shoreless sea.”

Let us hold close the Father’s words: **“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”**