

THE QUALITY OF PRODIGALITY

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2010

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

When I learned this parable as a child, I learned to call it The Parable of the Prodigal Son. I wasn't sure what "prodigal" meant, but I knew it referred to the "bad son." I guess I thought it had to do with running away from home. Later, I learned that the word prodigal referred to *wasteful extravagance*. So the title of the parable referred not to his running away, but to his spending everything—his whole inheritance—on a "riotous" way of life. Or, as his older brother interpreted it, "devouring his father's property with prostitutes."

In seminary, I learned to think of this as the parable of the Jealous Older Brother. But there are other names for it.

Luke himself did not give the parable a name. But he set the parable in a context which should make clear that this is not just a story about wasteful extravagance. It has to do with the attitude problem of some in his audience:

"The Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow *welcomes sinners and eats with them.*"

The next words are "**So** he told them this parable." Meaning not the one about the prodigal son, but a brief parable about a lost sheep, which the shepherd went to great trouble to find, and then was very happy. Then Jesus told a second brief parable, about a lost coin, which the woman went to great trouble to find, and then was very happy. Then, without pause, Jesus raised the stakes. Now it was not a lost coin or a lost sheep, but a lost . . . person. The three parables are told to make a single point: God is happy to get lost people back. *Unlike* the older brother, who was angry at his father for welcoming the bad boy home. So, maybe the parable should be named after the elder. Or maybe it should be named after the father. After all, the parable is also meant to show the greatness of God's mercy and kindness.

Why not name it after all three? Let's call this "The Three Prodigals." I know it's a little silly, since the word "prodigal" occurs in no translation I can find.

But let's not give up on the word prodigal just yet—it's kind of a cool word. And it's already firmly ensconced in our cultural vocabulary. Here are a few definitions of the adjective:

1. wastefully or recklessly extravagant: *prodigal expenditure*.

2. giving or yielding profusely; lavish (usually fol. by *of* or *with*): *prodigal of smiles; prodigal with money.*
3. lavishly abundant; profuse: *nature's prodigal resources.*

Let me suggest that in this parable we have a sort of comparison and contrast. Three people are prodigal. Two sons, and a father.

The first son we know about, pretty well. He asked his father for his share of the inheritance, and took it on the road. Took it off somewhere where he could have his independence, I suppose, and started spending it all on satisfying himself. Bought some nice clothes, maybe, ate in nice restaurants, indulged himself in every way he could think of. Until the money ran out. That's prodigal, all right. Wastefully extravagant expenditure. He could have done something really sensible with all that money, like set himself up in business as a merchant. He could have found a cheap place to stay, at least, and so on. His prodigality was obvious. Flagrant.

On the other hand, it might surprise you for me to say that the other son was prodigal, but he was. You think just because he never even killed a young goat to eat with his friends, he was not wastefully extravagant. But he was wastefully extravagant in a different way. With his life. Look how he spent his life! "All these years," he said to his father . . . But what had he done with all those years? In his own words, he "worked like a slave." He "never disobeyed a command."

A slave? We have some idea what that father was like, from the story. Yet the older brother spent all those years under the same roof, and apparently he never loved his father, or knew that his father loved him, which he did. Remember that the younger son, when he repented, thought he should go back and be a servant to his father. Meanwhile, his older brother was doing just that!

But the father loved him, too! When he wouldn't come in to the party, the father didn't just ignore it. He *went out and began to plead* with him to come in and enjoy the party.

Thus the prodigality of the older brother was this: he wasted his life "being good," *without seeing either the gift in his circumstances or the love of his father.* I call that a waste. Lost years. I hope you will agree with me, that wasting your life is as bad as wasting your money.

I was listening to John Rutter's beautiful Magnificat the other day, thinking about this reading, and I heard the part which talks about how God has fed the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent away empty. "Esurientes implevit bonis, et divites dimisit inanes." That is the story of the two brothers in this story. The hungry one gets filled with good things, and the rich one goes away empty. "Inane" is the Latin word for how the rich one ends up, having wasted his life going through the motions of obedience and missing the love of the father.

There is a third prodigal in this story, the father.

Wastefully extravagant? From the beginning of the story, where he fills his younger son's wallet, to the middle, where we hear the younger son thinking about how his father's servants have "enough, and to spare" to eat, to the end, where the father says, "Quickly—bring out a robe — the best one — and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate!"—nobody is as wastefully extravagant, as lavish in his gifts and profuse with his kindnesses as the father himself. It is prodigality, in fact, for the father even to welcome his son home, after that son had wasted his young life. The prodigal father, prodigious in grace and mercy and lovingkindness.

Three ways to be prodigal. And I think we know who is the hero in this story. We know what kind of prodigality Jesus approves. This is the one of whom Paul wrote in Romans 8:32, "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" The super abundant mercy of God towards us is the theme of Scripture. And through Scripture we find God working to have a relationship with us which is founded on that goodness of his. He doesn't want us to slash and burn our way through the good things of this world, as though it were just there for us to devour. Nor does God want us for his robots, slavishly clocking in and clocking out until we die. God wants us to repent of both of those ways of living, repent and recognize his mercy towards us, and then live in that mercy.

Jesus Christ, in his suffering, dying, and rising, is the generous gift of that prodigal father to all of us. Baptized into Christ, we receive the best robe and an expensive ring, and we sit down to a wonderful feast with brothers and sisters who are also glad to be home, and glad to be our brothers and sisters. He died, i.e., he

recklessly and extravagantly poured out the most precious thing a person has, his blood, to express the joy God has when we return to him.

God calls both prodigal sons to repent and join him at his table, and rise to work on his farm not as slaves but as free and beloved children, empowered by his mercy towards us. Amen.

