

Sermon, Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32

No Bible text has logged more pulpit time than this wonderful parable of the prodigal son. A storehouse of sin and redemption, of grace and the refusal of grace. Over the years, we preachers have tried all sorts of approaches to unpack the riches of this story.

Two Lenten seasons ago, we read this parable every Sunday during Lent. I preached on the story from the perspectives of the father, the prodigal and the older brother. Our traditional Lenten Wednesday night class studied this parable. The prodigal son for the whole season of Lent!

I heard about a pastor who once gave a sixteen-week sermon series on the prodigal son. After the sixteenth sermon, a woman greeted the pastor at the door of the church and said, “I’m so sorry that poor boy ever ran away from home.”

Jesus tells this story in response to the pharisees and scribes who

were grumbling and saying of him, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” The good people were scandalized. They let Jesus know it.

In response, he told a story that is misleadingly called the story of the prodigal son, ignoring the fact that there were two sons and that the biting part of the story was aimed directly at those who were criticizing Jesus, who were in fact acting just like the elder brother.

But forget the brothers for now, the real center of the action and the great proclamation of the gospel is the father, the rejoicing father. It is the father’s action which is the most surprising of all three characters. The brothers behave the way brothers behave, like people we all know. In fact, we behave like the bothers. We are the brothers.

Question: When will we begin to accept and apply the standards of Christ instead of the standards of the world?

Observe the behavior of the father in the parable. What does the father do when his wayward son returns home, confessing his sin and unworthiness? Dad puts on a great feast and makes this unworthy, sinful child the guest of honor.

This is very the proclamation of the gospel by Jesus. It is his word on how you will be treated when you repent and return to the Lord your God. It is a proclamation to us, because we are sinners and unworthy of such a feast with God.

If you have been in that far-off land, squandering God's gifts of life and talent on selfish and unworthy things, if you have come to yourself and realized how much you have lost, if you feel unworthy even to be called a child of God, if you ever struggle with feelings of guilt and shame...then this story is very good news for you.

Jesus gives you something to look forward to, a reason to return home. A great feast is awaiting you at the end of the road. Do not

give up. All is not lost. It is not too late to live. The father is waiting for you, filled with compassion. When you return, he will seat you at his own table. This story of grace is the judgment of God. Jesus has let you see it ahead of time.

But...and there's always a but in every sermon. But, what if you've been here all along? What if you've worked hard and done every single thing the father commanded? What if you are not so much the prodigal son, but are more like the elder brother? As we consider this story, it is clear there is more than one way to leave the father. One brother traveled to a distant country. He took his body and mind away.

The other brother was every bit as far away from the father. His heart was equally distant. A son who was close to the father would have felt at least some of the father's joy upon his brother's return. Or he would at least have celebrated because of his father's joy. No, the elder brother thought only of himself. The term for him is self-

righteous. He would not celebrate his brother's return or share in the joy of his father.

Nevertheless, this story also has good news even for the elder brother. The father came out to plead with him to come to the feast. The father has better things to be doing than stand out in the darkness with a sulking older brother. He's got a party going on. But there the father is, taking time to listen, to console, to care for his older boy. The father cares for him, too.

We understand that if the older brother does go in, he will certainly be welcome. But the story concludes without us knowing if the older brother does finally give up his pride and enter the party. Oh, I would have liked to have seen him join the celebration with a big smile and a tear in his eye and embrace his brother with a huge hug, and then, join in the dancing and the feasting.

But we don't know. We do know the party goes on and the elder

brother's refusal to enter does not hinder the celebration or spoil the joy of others. The party goes on with or without the elder brother. You can come in or stay out, it's up to you.

We not only tell this story, a story that may be the greatest of Jesus' stories, we not only tell it, we do as Jesus told us, we proclaim this story in action in our worship service whenever we serve communion. What we call a foretaste of the feast to come. A feast for the return of God's lost children. Prodigals and self-righteous are always invited. Communion is the feast laid out by the Father for wayward children who return.

As you meditate on this story of Jesus, please consider which brother is your story. More importantly, you must decide whether to return to your Father. You must decide whether you will come in to celebrate with God. Every one of us has been invited by God to the feast.

Softy and tenderly, Jesus is
calling. Come home, come home.
You who are weary come home.

In your life, I pray that you
understand that you are not
leaving home, you are going
home.