

Unreasonable Love Pastor Morgan Murray West Valley Presbyterian Church

This is one of the most well known portions of the gospels. Even people who have never read the bible have likely heard this story, or heard of it. The phrase “prodigal son” is part of our secular culture and people use it even if they don’t know exactly where it comes from. Charles Dickens called it “the finest story ever written.”

It is often referred to as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” or some variation; The NIV’s header says “The Parable of the Lost Son” and the NRSV introduces it as “The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother.” The word “prodigal,” by the way, doesn’t mean wayward or ungrateful or rebellious. It means “wastefully extravagant.” **Prodigal means to spend until you have nothing left.** That is why, when Tim Keller wrote a book about this story, he titled it “The Prodigal God.” This is a story about how God shows unreasonable love to people we might say it is unreasonable to love. (If you want to see a great example of this, google the advertisement for and spending app called Greenlight. It features actor Ty Burrell from Modern Family buying all sort of ridiculous stuff, saying “I’ll take it!” until the end where he says, “What do you mean I’m broke?”)

The thing about Parables: Like a diamond with facets, they reveal more of themselves when seen from a new angle or a fresh light. Like any great story that we re-read over and over, they touch our hearts in different ways as we get older. When I was young, I identified with the younger son. When I took on the title of pastor, I realized the older son was the character that required my attention. Now that I have been a dad for a good long time, my imagination is captured by the father in this story.

As you listen, imagine be among the people who heard Jesus tell this story the very first time. What feelings come up as you listen? Which character makes you the most sad, or angry, or confused? With which character do you most identify?

Allow the Holy Spirit to direct your attention to something you might not have noticed before. Maybe it’s a word or a phrase, or something one of the characters says that causes your ears to perk up a bit. What might God be wanting to say to you through it?

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

15 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...

“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.' "

I wonder what your visceral reaction to this story is as you hear again as if for the first time. For some of us (like me), I still have a have, "But that's not fair!" response. Maybe it's my birth order, maybe it's my enneagram number, I don't know. But even though I know the Older Brother's response is mean-spirited and full pride and resentment it still resonates with a part of me that still needs healing.

Perhaps this story just feels beautiful to you, so full of grace. Maybe you are really in touch with the guilty remorse of the younger brother. Maybe you have had sojourn or two, far from God in a distant land that started off exciting but ended up lonely and miserable. Maybe you feel undeserving of God's love and feel like you will need to spend your whole life trying to earn God's unearnable favor.

It's really easy for us to get stuck in one of these two places, or to go back and forth between them.

But if we do that, we are missing the point of the parable.

The way that Luke sets things up at the beginning of the chapter, it's clear what Jesus is up to:

The Pharisees and the scribes are the older son.

The tax collectors and the sinners are the younger son.

God is the Father who loves both and all equally, extravagantly, and scandalously.

I recall someone imagining the reactions in the crowd as Jesus gets to the part where the Father “ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” There would have audible gasps of disbelief that the Father would do something so undignified, so humiliating.

That is prodigal love. It is the love that spends until there is nothing left.

It’s the same love the apostle Paul describes in Philippians 2 when he talks about Jesus (Phil 2:4-8):

4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 **but emptied himself,**
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Jesus gave himself until there was nothing left. Jesus is our prodigal Savior, revealing the heart our prodigal God! And why does Paul draw our attention to this fact! Because we are to have same mind, the same intention.

The point of the parable isn’t to keep us vacillating between being the older or young son, and it certainly isn’t to get us all judgey about others like the Scribes and Pharisees are toward the tax collectors and sinners. Frankly the tax collectors and sinners were probably feeling pretty smug at the end of Jesus’ story too! But again: Not the point!

Our challenge is own up to our tendency to judge and to be resentful. We judge others for not being worthy of God’s love. We judge God for loving others so extravagantly when we believe they don’t deserve it. Heck, sometimes we judge God for loving US too much! This story is dump that nonsense, and to seek the heart change that enables us to love others as unreasonably as God does.

The point of the parable is this: **While it is natural and necessary for us to identify with the sons, what we are supposed to do is become like the Father!**

Call

Who is God calling you to accept as just as worthy of God's love as you are? How could show God's love to them in a tangible way?

We are called to be a prodigal church. We are to be prodigal disciples, following a prodigal Lord who reveals the character of our Heavenly Prodigal Father.

Amen.