

Reconciled  
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Prodigal, wasteful, reckless, dissolute, profligate, extravagant, uncontrolled, spendthrift, wastrel, squanderer. Bible readers have named this parable of Jesus “The Prodigal Son.” And it has been told and painted and preached on so often that you might wonder whether there is anything more to say about it. Peter Gomes, who used to be a professor and chaplain at Harvard, tells the story of a man who preached a 16-week series on the parable of the Prodigal Son. At the end of the 16 weeks, a woman greeted the pastor at the door said, “I am so sorry that that poor boy ever ran away from home.” You might say that we are “prodigal” with our words on the subject of this story. Last week, I spoke to an elderly woman in Chapel Hill about my work and my sermons. She asked, “How long are your sermons?” I said that (as far as I can tell) my sermons are between 10 and 20 minutes long. She said, “Oh, I think that a 20 minute sermon is a ‘gracious plenty’.” In the South, “gracious plenty” is a euphemism for a whole lot of food on the table, the “groaning board,” so to speak. Too much preaching, or preaching too long, can feel like eating way too much of a good thing. So we should consider, at the beginning, what the word prodigal actually means. Hence the words earlier: wasteful, dissolute, etc., etc. as well as lavish, profuse, and copious.

Before we get too far into this story of the father with two sons, we should remember that it is the third and most elaborate of a series of parables told by Jesus in response to those who questioned his association and table fellowship with sinners. First, Jesus tells those who were grumbling (or murmuring, as the older language would have it) about a shepherd with 100 sheep who searches high and low when he loses one of them. When the sheep is found, there is great rejoicing. Then, there is the woman who loses one of her 10 silver coins. After searching with lamp and broom, she finds it, and calls all her neighbors to rejoice with her. So the series continues with this concept of “lostness” and “foundness” and celebration. But where the first two parables were contained units, this family tale leaves us more uncertain. We are troubled by a few things, and it is open-ended: there is no neat resolution.

Those familiar with Jewish life in the first century will notice several shocking details. A younger son asking for his inheritance before the death of his father is not just a financial transaction, asking for a loan. It is a deep and painful insult, basically saying, “I see no value in you apart from your wealth, and I wish you were dead now.” The journey to a “distant country” is not just a vacation: it is a rejection of family and faith. And, of course, working to feed the pigs, and wanting to share their food would be repellent to any Jew: physically and morally repellent. And finally, the father running to meet his son was a shocking sort of debasement, since a grown man did not shame himself by running in public. This was a story to make all decent people squirm.

We, living in a different culture, may be left with a vaguer sense of disquiet. We may be more troubled by the last part of the story, where the hard-working older brother comes in from the field, not having heard the invitation to rejoice. He just happens to show up, apparently: he has to ask what’s going on. Of course he is hurt and angry, of course he refuses to go in. We hear his heartfelt complaint to his father and (perhaps depending on whether you are the oldest or youngest

in your family) it makes emotional (and financial) sense. Our enjoyment of that feast with music and dancing is tainted by the response of the one outside the door. The celebration is not complete.

Maybe that is a good place for us to stay and reflect for a while. What all three parables about “lostness” and “foundness” and celebration seem to be saying is that as long as one is lost, the 99 or the 9 are incomplete. As long as one is in a distant country, alienated and hungry and full of regret, the family is broken. As long as the sinner is rejected, by himself or others, God is still waiting and scanning the horizon. And as long as one stands outside the celebration, fuming and resentful, God pleads with words of love and promise.

To some extent, all of us have a share in the “lostness,” the lack of wholeness that the children in this family portray. We may have made demands of those who love us that are hurtful and unreasonable. We may have wandered into a distant country, imagining ourselves to be rich and self-sufficient. We may have squandered and wasted our gifts. Or we may have stayed at home, toed the line, lived frugally and dutifully, but without joy or generosity. In either case, we have been alienated from the bottomless and openhearted love of God, the love that seeks wholeness and reconciliation. When we know that we do not deserve unconditional grace, or we assume that we don’t need it because we have been earning it all along, we are lost.

Recently I read a book called Tattoos on the Heart by Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest who has spent decades working with gang members in Los Angeles. For a while, he served at the Dolores Mission Church, and in 1987 it declared itself a sanctuary church for undocumented immigrants. At night, the church allowed undocumented men to sleep in the sanctuary and women and children to sleep in the convent. This, needless to say, was controversial. Father Boyle got hate messages and death threats. The church was sprayed with hateful graffiti. Not only that, but the physical or olfactory consequences of the mission to the immigrants began to be noticeable. Not overwhelming, but the evidence that dozens of unwashed men had been sleeping there was always there. Even vacuuming and potpourri and Air Wick and holy incense could not erase it. Boyle decided to confront this in a responsive sermon.

He asked the congregation, “What does the church smell like?” People were embarrassed and tongue-tied until one forthright man yelled out, “Smells like feet.” “Excellent. But why does it smell like feet?” “Because many homeless men slept here last night,” answered someone else. “Well, why do we let that happen here?” “It’s what we are committed to do.” “And why would anyone commit to do that?” “It’s what Jesus would be doing.” “Well then, what does our church smell like now?” A man stood up and bellowed, “It smells like commitment!” People started to cheer and a woman cried out, “It smells like roses!” This was all a conversation in Spanish, you understand. The packed church exploded with laughter. The place did not smell any different, but people understood it differently. They had decided to join the celebration, to complete the family. They wanted to be 100%.

In Jesus’ parable, the father wants many things. He wants to share forgiveness and the joy of homecoming with his younger son. He wants to share the joy of forgiving with his older, loyal son. He wants the celebration to smell like roses, even if the younger son has not had a chance to wash.

Nowhere in this parable does Jesus mention the Kingdom of God. But we have noticed in the Gospel that almost every time he does talk about the Kingdom of God, there is a party, or a

banquet, a feast with an open invitation. The action of the parable revolves around the human response to invitation. The story of the prodigal son leaves us wondering: what will happen. Jesus has given us no ending, because this story is a call to action.

The younger son will not receive another inheritance: because, as the father says to the older son, "Everything I have is yours." In the unwritten epilogue, what will the older son do? Revoke the forgiveness so freely offered by the father and drive his brother away? Or keep the younger brother on as an actual hired hand, making sure that he feels, every day, the resentment and anger of his brotherly employer? There are many ways for that older brother to retain his anger and resist reconciliation, many ways for him to feel justified in doing so. If he misses this invitation to the celebration, offered so lovingly by his father, will he be able, tomorrow or next year, to heal the rift and rejoice? Will he be able to be prodigal, lavish, extravagant in love for his brother once he unlocks his heart?

Paul, writing a letter to the Corinthian churches, also talks about reconciliation. But rather than talking about a family, he speaks in cosmic terms. The world is reconciled to God through Christ, and we inherit this ministry of reconciliation. This great drama of reconciliation is prodigal or extravagant in scope. But it is lived out one person at a time, as we choose to be ambassadors for Christ, those to whom the message has been entrusted. Paul may never have heard the parable of the prodigal Son – in fact, it is almost certain that he did not. But we see the thread of connection, a call to action worded slightly differently, and we can take it up and be "in Christ" and in solidarity with our sisters and brothers.

The literature of the United Church of Christ, to which our church belongs, includes the statement "We are a People of Extravagant Welcome," which is a wonderful phrase. And, as I said earlier, we could find a lot of synonyms for "extravagant" and prodigal. But words will only take us so far. Living out an extravagant, prodigal welcome involves hospitality, an open and affirming resolution, scanning the horizon for those in need of food and love and inclusion, and overcoming the resentment, prejudice and squeamishness of the past. It involves recognizing our own need for forgiveness: our own lostness and foundness. And it involves celebration, rejoicing, a party that is so profigate in its scope that no one will be left standing outside the door. Maybe we should all be prodigal sons, but choose the blessed prodigality offered by the father. May our prayers and actions reflect a joyful certainty in the powerful embrace of God, waiting to welcome us all home. Amen.