

Lauren Baske Davis
Sermon on the Prodigal Parable – The Father
First UCC Northfield
2.20.2022

Luke 15:11-32

11 Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. 12The 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. 13A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17But 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! 18I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' " 20So 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. 21Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." 22But 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. 23And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24for 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. 26He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." 28Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29But 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. 30But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" 31Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32But 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."

Sermon

Thank you, Teigen, Matt and Brad, for being the parent and two sons for us, interpreting the scripture for us to see and hear. Your growing story has been such a gift to get to watch these last weeks! And thanks, Bob Gregory-Bjorklund, for preparing the scripture in a way so that we can fully experience it!

We've finally gone through Jesus' parable most commonly referred to as the Prodigal Son, in three ways. We are learning more about this parable through the characters in this story. Two weeks ago we started with the youngest "prodigal" son, then last week the elder son. Today, we are focusing on the father in this parable.

But to complete the series, we need to go full circle, and close the loop as we end our Prodigal Son sermon series today. I want to reach back to something Pastor Cindy said the first week, when she focused on the younger, "prodigal" son.

You see, Pastor Cindy noticed something—a detail about a line in the parable—she said, "Many translations and paraphrases read, 'When [the younger son] came to his senses,' he realized his father's hired hands were better off than he was." When he came to his senses. But

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then Cindy noticed that “the New Revised Standard Version says ‘When he came to himself,’” the Greek the translation being, “into himself yet coming.” The younger son “came to himself.”¹

The idea is that he came to some true, deep part of himself—probably not the arrogant, self-centered part of himself that propelled him to ask for his inheritance early and leave his father’s home. He “came to himself.” We don’t know if that means he was fully repentant—or just really hungry—but as Jesus tells it in the parable, the younger son came into some truer, deeper part of himself, and that’s what made him turn around and go home to his father, even though he didn’t know what he would find.

It’s funny that Cindy noticed that interesting translation, noticed that the younger son turned around and went home as an act of coming into himself. You see, I just came upon that line, that idea of coming into one’s truer self, in a completely different place.

Tattoos on the Heart is Father Greg Boyle’s first book. Boyle is a Jesuit priest who, for years, has served Dolores Mission Church in Los Angeles. When he started there, 34 years ago, it was the poorest parish in LA, and the neighborhood had the highest concentration of gang activity in Los Angeles, which, Boyle remarks, is saying something for the gang capital of the world. Boyle created an organization that provides jobs, job training, and encouragement, so that young people in the neighborhood have an alternative, and can find belonging and opportunity. Today it is the largest gang intervention, rehab, and re-entry program in the world. It is not punitive, it is transformative.

Boyle’s book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, is a series of modern parables. In the very beginning of *Tattoos on the Heart*, Boyle writes this:

“I was born and raised in the ‘gang capital of the world’...as a teenager, though, I would not have known a gang member if one came up and, as they say, ‘hit me upside the head.’ I wouldn’t have been able to find a gang if you’d sent me on a scavenger hunt to locate one.... That is a fact. That fact, however, does not make me morally superior to the young men and women you will meet in this book. Quite the opposite.”

Then he goes on to talk about the real people he has written about, how they have taught him about being noble, courageous, and closer to God. He talks about how they have taught him that healing does not occur in a straight line. Then he writes, “*There can be no doubt that (these people) have returned me to myself.*”² The relationships that have come from his work, the people he knows, have helped him come into his truer, deeper self.

The relationships he’s had have returned him or helped him come into himself. The reason I bring this story up is because I think in order to fully understand the father—or the parent—in our prodigal parable, we have to look at the relationships. Some have wondered who exactly we are without the relationships we have with one another.

Now to be sure, relationships are messy, and we see that clearly in our parable. The sons are definitely not acting out of their truer, deeper selves. They have at times tried to break from their relationships in unhealthy ways.

¹ Rev. Cindy Maddox, sermon at First UCC Northfield on February 6, 2022.

² Father Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, Free Press, 2011, see also <https://homeboyindustries.org/our-story/about-homeboy/>

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Let's start with the younger son, because to begin to understand the father, we've got to look at his interactions with his children. We know this parable is often called the parable of the Prodigal Son. Prodigal is a word for *wasteful*: the parable of the wasteful son. In asking for his inheritance early he disregards his respect of or relationship with his family. With his father whom he is to respect, his brother with whom he's to work the family business. His mother, if one is still around, who would rely on not one but both sons for support after the father dies. Essentially, the younger son attempts to "un-son" himself from his father.³ The prodigal son disregards it *all*, letting a hunger for his own pleasure, his own wants, draw him away. Imagine this, in a culture where being an individual wasn't really a thing. That he tries to "un-son" himself.

If he were to return—which we know he does—if he were to return, poor and helpless with nothing to give back to his family and the community, there was an official ritual where upon returning, the community could "un-person" him. They could take a big jar of burnt corn and nuts and hold a ritual where they smash it at his feet, and by doing so, making him "a cosmic orphan," of no community, of no village, of no family, a shadow of a person with no relationships in a place where individualism isn't a thing.⁴ It would be absolute shame. That's how dire the consequence could be for his actions. Or, that's how badly he wanted to get out; that he didn't care. Those were the potential consequences he chose. He un-son-ed himself, risking being forever cut off from everyone he ever knew.

And yet when he *does* return, after having coming to himself—coming to some deeper sense of self—the village doesn't have a chance to have that ritual that cuts him off from everyone. Before the community can throw an "un-personing" ritual, the father sees him in the distance and runs to him.

Preacher Alan Storey notes the beautiful character sketch of the father we see in his welcoming the prodigal home. This is what Alan Storey notices about the father: "he is *full* of compassion; whose root word means wombishness, the ability to give life. Compassion gives life, and the father is full, as in, nothing else can fit in" the father's being. Then, Storey notes, in a culture where patriarchs call or summon people to them and are obeyed, instead, the father ran. He dropped everything and ran to his son. Another preacher says the father's robes were probably flailing about him, exposing his legs, which was also not a thing one did, and was entirely improper for a patriarch.⁵ Alan Storey continues to paint the picture of the father. His "arms for embracing, his lips not for cursing but for kissing." His entire being is overwhelmed with his child coming home.⁶

No matter what the prodigal, wasteful son's practiced words of confession were, and not matter if they were heartfelt or just a way to weasel his way into the household to get a

³ Miroslav Volf, quoted by Karoline Lewis on workingpreacher.org

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, sermon "The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family," quoting Kenneth Bailey, "The Pursuing Father," *Christianity Today* 26 October 1998.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rev. Alan Storey, Central Methodist Mission, Capetown South Africa, sermon from 2013, cmm.org.za

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meal, they were words spoken into the muffled robe of a rejoicing parent embracing him.⁷ You see, even with the story of the wasteful son who tried to “un-son” himself from his father, we learn about the father’s character through his continued relationship with the son, even as the son’s mistakes are on full view. The father’s compassion and love come first. Curiously, the father doesn’t say a word to the younger son. But his actions speak so loudly they tell us everything we need to know.

Now take the older brother in relationships with others. He’s the one who stayed, who worked hard, who has every right to be angry that he’s never once been thrown a party like the younger wasteful son is being thrown. So he says to the father, “oh but when this [younger] son of yours came back, you killed the fatted calf for him!” The older brother, attempts to un-brother himself. He refuses to acknowledge that this wastrel younger son is related to him whatsoever. He might as well have said, “he’s no brother of mine.”

But do you see what the father does? He refuses to let the older brother “un-brother” himself. He said, “my son you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because”—and I think these are the most important words—“this brother of yours”—*this brother of yours*—“was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found.” The father doesn’t say, “Son, this other son of mine was dead and is alive, was lost and has been found,” he makes a point to say, “we must rejoice because *your brother* was dead and is alive, was lost and is found.” The father is encouraging the elder son to come back to himself. To be the big brother. To see that the joy of his brother’s recovery doesn’t rob him of anything. The father, despite his faults, is encouraging the older son to see that he could find joy by feasting and busting a move on the dance floor. You see, the father knows that there is joy to be found in loving others and being loved unconditionally.

Now, to be sure, the father’s actions are foolish. To be sure, he is exposing himself to risk, being so vulnerable. It is a downright dicey way to be with one child who has so hurt the family and the other who is hurt. The father’s actions may not be savvy or logical, but the father makes it clear he would much rather be a fool for love. That he would much rather stay in the relationship *with* and encourage relationship *between* his sons. (Please hear me: I’m not saying all relationships need staying in. They don’t. I am not advocating for that. I’m speaking in this case.) Because the father knows there might be a chance that the brothers will eventually come into themselves. He’s seen it happen, slowly, these children coming into themselves. He knows that their relationship might have the chance of bending before it breaks. That instead of being the wasteful son and the curmudgeon son, they might come back to themselves and be brothers. He’s trying to show them through his relationship with them, that they are on the way to coming into their truer selves.

Last week, Pastor Cindy said that I get to be the lucky one to say whether I think the father is supposed to be God. A lot of people think so but at the same time, he’s kind of flawed. And it’s a parable! That’s not for me to figure out for you! The point of a parable is to be able to walk around in it, not to have clear answers. And if the father has elements of God, that’s great!

⁷ Ibid.

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If it works for you, great. But let's be careful about gendering God here, too. I will say this: it's both typical and moving to see the parent figure here as God in this parable. But who is who in this story is an important thing to figure out if we're going to apply our own lives to it.

Let's return to Father Greg Boyle's story that I told you about. How we apply the figures in the parable matters. Using Boyle's example, if we're not careful, we might think, "Oh! The gang members are the prodigals, and the priest is the father." But that's not what Boyle would have you know. Remember what Boyle said? He said that he grew up in the world capital of gangs never knowing it—that's some serious disconnection—and that it's only through his relationships with the people in the community that he has come into himself. That they have been the father to him, that he has been the wasteful, prodigal one.

As we close this series, walk around in this parable. Ask yourself who has helped you come into yourself. Sure, yes, love like the parent in this story, and if it's a good God image for you, use it. But also think about the places in your own life, the people, the relationships where you have come to yourself through the abundant love of another. Thanks be to God. Amen.