

Scripture Lesson:

Luke 15:11-20a

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 73-74

¹¹ Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to his senses 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.

Hymn UMH #383: *"This Is a Day of New Beginnings" (vs. 1, 3-4)***Scripture Lesson:**

Luke 15:20b-32

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 73-74

²⁰ But while the young man 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 as 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 assets 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'."

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 15:11-32

03/30/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"Prodigals All"

Rev. Amy Terhune

The Rev. Dr. Fred B. Craddock was the professor of preaching and new testament at Candler School of Theology at Emory University down in Georgia for decades. He went on to glory in 2015, but remains one of the great preachers of the 20th and early 21st century. He was called to fill in for a

preacher in a neighboring town who had to be away one Sunday, and Fred preached on this text ... not by choice, so much as by assignment. Leading a fellow who filed through after the service to say: "I really didn't care much for that, frankly."

But here's how Fred tells it:

I said, "Why?"

He said, "Well, I guess it's not your sermon. I just don't like that parable."

This is the parable sometimes called the gospel within the gospel.

I said, "What is it you don't like about it?"

He said, "It's not morally responsible."

I said, "What do you mean by that?"

"Forgiving that boy," he said, "It's not morally responsible."

I said, "Well, what would you have done?"

He said, "I think when he came home, he should've been arrested."

He's an attorney, I thought. Then I thought maybe he was going to tell me a joke. But no, he was really serious. He belonged to this unofficial organization nationwide, never has any meetings and doesn't have a name, but it's a very strong network that I call "quality control people." They're the moral police. Mandatory sentences and no parole, mind you, and executions.

I said, "What would you have given the prodigal?"

He said, "Six years." [above story adapted from William A. Ritter, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com.]

I've heard that Fred Craddock story a couple of times now, and my jaw hits the deck every time. Six years? For what? I mean, you could certainly argue that the younger son is an ungrateful little snot, even a morally reprehensible nauseating wretch of a man, but I'm coming up short on actual chargeable offenses. It's not against the law to be a dirtbag. Don't confuse legality with morality; they intersect but they aren't the same. And if you look at the story with me, you'll notice that vs. 12 reports events like this: the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.' So the father divided his assets between them. That's what it says. The kid doesn't steal it or swindle it or defraud dear old dad to get it. The boy asks, the father gives. There you have it.

With all due respect to Fred Craddock's critic filing out the door after worship, I don't think that Jesus ever intended moral responsibility to be the major of theme of this parable. I am not saying it doesn't matter, but rather, that there are things that matter more. As Chapter 15 opens, Luke reports, "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So Jesus told them this parable.... Actually he tells them three. A lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost boy. And in each of those lessons, it's not what is lost that Jesus focuses on, but rather, the one who seeks the lost and who celebrates joyfully when the lost is found.

This is a parable about relationship, about God's love for all of us. There isn't a one of us that doesn't make bad choices sometimes. There isn't a one of us who hasn't ever been lost in the wilderness. That's not my opinion. That's a theological reality, according to scripture. But we don't always appreciate how hard life is for others or how much privilege we started off with from day one.

Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel sing about how hard life can be on the road. Bryan played it for us earlier. We envy fame and money without taking into account the hours spend in hotel rooms on the road away from everything that really matters. I wish I was homeward bound, they sing. Home where my thought's escaping, Home where my music's playing, Home where my love is waiting silently for me.

I wonder if that was the Prodigal sons song, too. His story is a rough one. First, he asks dad for his inheritance, which means the kid is basically saying to dad, "I wish you were dead because I want your stuff." But dad gives it. And he lets his son go. There are a lot of people in this world who live as if God were dead – who squander time, resources, gifts, and relationships. And there are a lot of people out there judging others about it – to the point where we, as a people, have gotten mean. I grieve that reality even as I wholly acknowledge that I am part of the problem.

That younger son goes off. Maybe he wants to see the world. Maybe he just wants to get away from his dad and his brother. We don't know if its wanderlust or resentment that drives him, but off he goes. And he squanders everything in dissolute living. And then a famine hits, and he has no choice but to work for minimum wage feeding pigs. That's when he comes to himself, it says in verse 17. Back home, nobody is living this way. I'll go to my father. I basically spat in his face when I left. I can never be his son again, but maybe he'll give me a job.

"In the book *Love Story* by Erich Segal, Jennifer and Oliver have their first serious fight as newlyweds. Jennifer runs from the apartment and disappears. She has tried to build a bridge of reconciliation between her husband and his father ... and Oliver in anger tells her to get out of his life. Suddenly, Oliver realizes he has hurt her deeply, but she is gone!

"Frantically he searches for her, and all the while, she becomes more beloved to him in the emptiness of estrangement... Finally, having run out of places to look, he dejectedly returns to the apartment. It is very late. But unbelievably she is sitting on the front steps.

"He hurries to her and begins to express his sorrow for hurting her. She replies: "Love means not ever having to say you're sorry." [3 ¶s adapted from "On Being Able to Be Sorry" by Allan J. Weenink, www.Sermons.com.]

I don't know who thought that was a romantic line, but it's total bologna. Love apologizes. Love is strong enough to make amends. One of the most loving things we can do is say sorry and mean it enough to change unhealthy patterns. The younger son gets it. His thoughts have been escaping for home for a while now. He appreciates what he didn't realize he had before. He knows he has no claim on the family anymore. He knows he's a prodigal son.

Let's look for a moment at the word 'prodigal'. According to the dictionary, the word 'prodigal' is an adjective that means 'reckless' or 'wasteful.' 'Prodigal' is derived from the Latin word *prodigere*, which is translated as the verb 'to squander.' Therefore, a prodigal son is literally a wasteful son, one who squanders opportunities recklessly and wastefully." [from "The Waster" by Frank G. Honeycutt, www.Sermons.com.] The younger son is obviously prodigal.

But you could argue that the father is, too. When his lost son finally shows up, dad goes running out to meet him. The kid barely has a chance to choke out his speech about no longer being worthy to be a son, treat me as a hired hand, and the father is calling for a robe and a ring and shoes. These are not things you give servants or hired hands. These are status symbols – gifts for a son. Then Dad goes and kills the fatted calf! I mean, if you're going to feed a family and a few workers, you might kill a couple of chickens or a turkey. If the neighbors are coming, or the extended family, you might kill a goat or a lamb. If you've ever seen "My Big Fat Greek Wedding", Tuula brings her new fiancé to a family gathering of at least 50 or 60 people, and they're roasting lamb on a spit in the front yard. The lamb will feed 50 or 60. But Dad goes and kills the fatted calf. Do you know how many people a fatted calf will serve? The whole darn town! That's how many. And it's not like they have refrigeration. You have to eat it tonight, or it's going to go bad. So Dad is throwing one heck of a party. And it's not just the fatted calf! For the whole town, think of the amount of wine being drunk, the bread and veggies served with the fatted calf. This is an extravagant affair for a kid that squandered everything. Is it prodigal? Is it reckless, wasteful? Is it squandering the family resources unduly and without merit?

The older brother thinks so, doesn't he. Those of us who have been born and raised in the church, who have worked hard for it for years, who haven't squandered but have saved and sacrificed for our faith – we're supposed to identify with that older brother, or at least, or at least feel some sympathy and understand where he's coming from. He's the one who has worked in the fields for all these years, who has served his father faithfully. Notice, there's a party going on, dinner being served, the whole town is there, and the older son is just now coming in from the fields. No doubt, he's been out there all day, working overtime, doing whatever it takes. He doesn't waste time or opportunities. He seizes every chance he has to labor on behalf of the family business, and goes above and beyond in giving of himself. He's sweaty, he's dirty, he's tired. And he can hear the music and the crowd and the dancing. He has to ask a servant what's happening because Dad didn't even have the courtesy to send anyone out to the fields with a message like, "hey, your brother is home, throwing a party, come on in and get cleaned up!" No, dad just left him out there working in the fields! No wonder he's jealous. No wonder he feels undervalued. Right? Are you feeling this?

There's a show on CBS on Sunday nights right now called "Tracker". It's about a guy who finds people. That's what he does for a living. He travels the country in his camper. Somebody goes missing, a reward is offered, and he brings his gifts and network to bear to find whoever is lost. Why does he do it? Because he knows what it's like to be lost. As a boy, his father was one of those doomsday preppers convinced that government was corrupt and people were evil, so he took the family off the grid and out into the wilderness. Sadly, the isolation only fed his paranoia, and his children suffered for it. Now his son finds lost people to feel connected to others, to save families, to do good in the world. Finding others is how he finds himself, how he recovers from his own trauma.

That older brother doesn't seem to know what it's like to be lost, which is ironic, given that he's lost in his own little pity party and can't seem to see it. He's a prodigal, too. He's only got one brother and one father, and he seems ready to squander his connection to both. He's reckless with relationships. He's wasteful of possibilities for redemption, renewal, and connection. Because he can't get out of his own head long enough to see the opportunity for healing, wholeness, and new life. It's not fair, he complains. And he's right. God is not fair. God is gracious. God is merciful. God gives gifts far more abundantly than we recognize or acknowledge. None of us get what we deserve, thank God. And that's Jesus' point to the Pharisees and all of us who may consider ourselves to be religious stalwarts working for the Kingdom of God. Being right is cold comfort compared with the joys of being part of the celebration of life and redemption and renewal.

See, the Father not only had two sons, but loved two sons, was generous to two sons, and went out to fetch in two sons. When the older won't come in, Father goes out to plead with him, reminding him that he is always with him and that all that belongs to the Father is his. When the elder attempts to separate himself from the younger by speaking of him as 'this son of yours', the father gently reminds him that he is also 'this brother of yours'.

We, too, need to be fetched back in. We who have stuck around in faith and obedience can so easily forget how much God delights in our presence with him day in and day out; how much we have gained in joining our hearts with the heart of Christ; how God loves us so much that no calculator or computer can ever hope to be able to calculate the sum of our worth in God's eyes. We who are heirs in Christ are all too easily shocked and appalled by the others included in the celebration. The wayward and uncomfortable ones: the woman who has had 5 abortions, the man who has done time in jail, the kid who stirs up trouble for attention. We accept as par for the course the gossip and the complainer and the naysayer, and turn around to judge the prostitutes and the addict and the homeless. We aren't sure how to welcome someone with an accent, someone whose skin is a different color, someone who isn't well educated. And we still struggle to embrace the gay, the

lesbian, the transgendered and others who are ‘different’—who trigger within us deep and uncomfortable questions that aren’t easy to answer. It is all too easy to forget that these are people and not issues, and they are our brothers; our sisters; our family. That no one is beyond God’s restorative love—and God’s joy will not be complete until all of us are together at home. And we forget why the church exists in the first place—to seek out the lost and the marginalized. We are supposed to be standing at the door looking out rather than in—looking out for the wayward and the hurting, to rush out and meet them and minister to them with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus calls one and all home to God’s house. And the Father waits eagerly for each and every one of us. Frank Honeycutt asks us to notice how the parable ends. Tomorrow, that younger son will have to go back out to the field and go to work? Will he do it? We don’t know. Tonight, that older brother is still standing in the back yard. Will he go in to the party or not? We don’t know. Jesus doesn’t tell us. That’s because we must each make the decision ourselves.

But before you make it, let me close with a story. It’s about a kid and preacher on a train. The preacher is reading, and the boy starts pacing. It’s distracting, and yet, the old preacher’s heart goes out to the kid. “You seem upset. I’m a preacher. Would it help to talk”. And it’s like someone opened a spigot. The kid starts pouring out his story. It’s not all that unusual, really. “Dad and I got in a fight. Harsh words were exchanged. I threatened to leave, and he told me if I walked out that door, I’d better never come back. I walked out the door anyway. Worked some odd jobs, lived on the street, met some other guys who were out there and we looked out for each other. One night, we robbed a store and I got landed in prison. When I found out I was being released, I wrote home. I told my parents what happened, and how sorry I was. I told them I was being released, and the train would be taking me past the house. My childhood home is right across the road from the tracks. I told them that if they didn’t want to see me again, that was fine, it was no more than I deserve. But if they did, they should tie something white to the big tree in the front yard, and then I’d know it was okay to stop for a visit. The house is ahead about 10 miles, and I don’t know if I can bear to look.”

The preacher said to the kid, “Sit down, take a deep breath, and I’ll watch for you. I’ll let you know if I see anything white on that tree.” So the preacher starts looking out the window, straining to see down the track. Then they went around a bend, and there, in front of him, was a tree. And somebody had emptied that house of every towel, every washcloth, every pillow case, even every piece of underwear—everything in that house that was white was out there flapping on that tree. And the preacher said, “hey kid, look at that!”

As soon as the young man caught a glimpse of the tree, he grabbed his suitcase, rushed out the door, and leaped off the train car as quick as he could. The last image that preacher saw was of that young man dragging his cardboard suitcase up the hill, and an older couple bursting out of the house to come greet him. [3 ¶]s as told by Philip Cunningham III, who attributes it to Rev. Ronnie White from Midland, TX, as used in “A Lost Boy” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com. Adapted here significantly.]

Are you going to tell me that is not morally responsible? Are you going to tell me you wouldn’t want to see that reunion? Are you going to tell me that’s a wasted effort? Love. Grace. New life. Redemption. Rebirth. These are the gifts of God. I would tell you not to miss it just because God gives it to someone other than you, but that wouldn’t be the whole story. Because it’s for you, too. Join the party, my friends. It’s for ALL of us. Thanks be to God.