

Provisions for the Journey: Forgiveness

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 10, 2013

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The journey of human life and growth is an adventure, not easy and predictable. Like a country road with detours, dead ends even places where we have to scout our own trail across country. This journey for some is marked deeply with pain and stumbling and for others not. God created us to live lives of messy adventure. This is the way we learn. The way we grow, the way we become more like Christ.

Prodigal. Lavish, Extravagant, and pretty much wasteful.

This is the way to live the Christian Life.

This famous, popular and well known parable that the lectionary affords us today reminds us of God's extravagant love and our call to be shaped to be made more like Christ

The parable begins with a simple enough request the child says: "Father give me the share of the property that will belong to me." This father, without any sort of hesitations divides his property and gives it to his child. This is shocking! This request, although totally legal, would have been a HUGE slap in the face, an unforgivable offense. Basically the son said to the father, I cannot possibly wait for you to die, so can I have my share of the money right now?

Then the son leaves, goes far away to Gentile land and spends all his money on immoral, self-indulgent things.

He is prodigal.

Prodigal. Lavish, extravagant, and *really* wasteful.

However, back home, the Father, anticipates that his son will return someday. The father longs for his son. He waits for him He hopes, maybe. Just maybe the son will come back, maybe as a beggar and probably as a failure.

But he will come back.

So, the father waits. He stands, watching, waiting, looking, and anticipating the return of his son.

And as the father is waiting for him, the son, in that far away land is realizing that he has messed up. He does some severe soul searching and comes up with a plan.

"'Father!' I will say, 'Father, I have sinned....'"

But the father has his own plan, a very prodigal plan, a plan that shows his love despite his child's departure a plan that will make things right. He knows what he will do the day that his son comes home. He waits day after day, gazing down the street to the roadway in the distance. He looks to the horizon over which the son had left

The father, who waits in patient anticipation for his child to come over the horizon, to turn from his ways of selfishness and greed, helps us understand more deeply and maybe more simply God's dealings with us in Christ. When we turn away from God, and decide that our ways are better than living under the same roof as God, our compassionate, full of love and prodigal God waits for us to return, for us to see our ways, and turn toward God's life for us. And it isn't an idle waiting, but an active one. God is seeking out God's lost ones. God is searching the horizon.

Prodigal, lavish, extravagant and pretty much wasteful

We go back to our prodigal parent in the story, who is waiting, and waiting, hoping and a praying for his lost child!

After all that waiting, the father sees something. Could it be? YES. It is... When the father spots his son a long way off, he runs. Now, no self-respecting, Jewish man does that, especially for a child who has asked him to die, who has left home and shamed their name! But this father, this father whose love is overwhelming him, takes off running.

As the son sees his father run toward him he is rehearsing his speech that he has come up with;
Father, I have sinned....

But when this prodigal parent reaches the prodigal child, the father does not even wait for the son to speak. Rather the father assumes another humiliating posture, as if running wasn't enough. He kisses his dirty son; he hugs his son in rags. The father speaks no words there, where they meet He substitute's kisses for words, his hands and arms for speeches. This extravagant father, just like our prodigal God had compassion on his child and will guide him and restore him back to life.

Prodigal. Lavish, extravagant, and pretty much wasteful.

The child is overwhelmed. He can only offer the first part of his practiced speech. "Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." In that moment his practiced speech takes on new meaning. He sees suddenly that the only way home is through his father's heart. He can now understand, like us that he cannot work in order for reconciliation to be achieved. He cannot be a hired hand and so earn his place in father's household. Reconciliation comes only through the unconditional love of the father.

This seems good enough for one day... The parent forgave the child, out of love, despite the past. God has reconciled us from our brokenness in Christ because of God's love.

The father's forgiveness is enough goodness for one day. However, there is more! The father throws a huge party for his lost son! He rejoices by calling all his friends, by killing the fatted calf and with music and dancing!

He is prodigal in his party throwing. For my child that had been dead, is now alive!

God in Christ does that for us when we come to the table together for communion. We rejoice together in Christ's feast to us. God in Christ rejoices when we lift up our hearts to God in Thanksgiving for God's faithfulness to all generations. Christ gives us a party when we gather here.

For we have, indeed been reconciled with Christ. He gives us an extravagant and lavish meal to celebrate, to remember the reconciliation that we have received in Christ and celebrate the relationship that we have!

Back to the prodigal parent's story...

Someone is missing from the party. The other son!

We find him outside of the party, pouting. He never gets parties! He never gets the fatted calf—not even a young goat does he get.

We ask ourselves, like the older son could the Father love the run-away child more?

Does God love and treasure those who are unfaithful more than he loves the faithful?

God doesn't have favorite children, and neither does the prodigal father in this parable.

For the second time in a day, the father is willing to offer a costly demonstration of love and forgiveness. Only now, his love, his prodigal love is shown to the elder son, the law keeper, not the lawbreaker.

So an extraordinary aspect of this parable is that hits us from both sides!

Amazing grace is shown to both children. The father would have been expected to ignore his grouchy elder son. He would be expected to ignore this insult and deal with the matter later. But, no, again he goes out to plead with his son, within earshot of his guests. In painful public humiliation, the father goes out to seek the lost child. This one is so close, yet so far away. He lives in the midst of blessing and yet has no joy.

Now we begin to see ourselves as both children in this story, sometimes getting annoyed at the unfaithful because God welcomes them back in, with a great big hug and a feast. We sometimes think that God cares for or rejoices in the run away more.

God cares for all of us deeply. God says to those who are faithful, just as the Father in the story says to his elder child, "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother, this *sister* of yours was dead and has come to life!"

As long as the one is lost, the church is incomplete. As long as one of our sisters or brothers is broken by the world, cast aside as irrelevant, called a sinner by the rest of us, then we are at a loss, and God's heart is broken. God will never stop reaching because God's love is too wide,

God's grace too rich to cease looking down the road for the lost, for those whom we deem unredeemable.

Jesus tells these parables in response to the righteous' rejection of Jesus' reaching out to the downtrodden and to the seemingly unforgivable. People of faith naturally don't want to be lumped together with hypocrites whom Jesus rebukes; we would much rather see ourselves as the recipients of God's ridiculous grace.

But, when we attack the undocumented for "cheating" the system and the poor for relying on government without hearing their stories and empathizing with their plights, we join the elder child saying in pouting,... you never killed a fatted calf for me!

The story of the prodigals is about God's ever expanding grace, a grace that will offend our sensibilities and our collective sense of fairness. God's grace ought to change us if we are its recipients.

Perhaps then this story will inspire us to see the world as God sees it: Our prodigal God looks down the road, drawing the lost in with extravagant, hugs, kisses, love, and forgiveness for the ones who are lost. God in God's love then also calls and expects the ones back at home to join in the feast. Join in the lavish welcoming, the extravagant encouraging, and the seemingly wasteful forgiving the loving that the Parent has lavished.

In Christ, in our baptism by the power of the Holy Spirit we have been made new. A great blessing from God who calls us into the celebration of the lost and of the found! All of this is from God, who calls us to the same, to have prodigal, extravagant, lavish and downright wasteful love, seeking of reconciliation and peace and faithfulness to our call. We are to show the love of Christ in a prodigal way because we have indeed received it in a prodigal way.

So friends, on this Lenten Journey as we wander, sometimes sort of aimlessly toward Holy Week hold close that in Christ you have been prodigally forgiven, rejoiced over, and extravagantly loved and now called to do the same to the lost that Christ puts on your adventure path. This is indeed Good News, Live in its peace!