

“From entitlement to inclusion”

2 Cor. 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (March 27, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

Today I want to tell you a familiar story about a father and his two boys.



All of us have lived in families. All of us have had fathers, of one sort or another. Some of us have had brothers as well. Our story today is commonly known as the “parable of the prodigal son.” Which focusses attention on *one* of these boys, and names him as “a prodigal.”

But what exactly is a prodigal? I’ve always wondered about that. Do *you* know what it means? Well here’s one definition: to be prodigal is to be “recklessly wasteful”. And sure enough, one of the two brothers in our story was both reckless and wasteful.

I’m talking about the younger one, of course. Who asked his father to divide the family inheritance and give him his portion.



The boy wanted his money and wanted it now. A few days later he packed his bags, money included, and took off. He went on a spending spree. Like he’d won the lottery – which he had, in a way. Here was a young lad with too many dollars and not enough sense!



He went as far away from his father’s house as he could get. And there, in that far off land, he began to spend his inheritance on all kinds of things that gave him pleasure. Things that made him friends – of a sort. Things that made him feel like he was somebody.



Until it all ran out. He spent the money, every last bit. When famine came, he went to work for a pig farmer. Which was an affront to his Jewishness. After a while, things got so bad, that he “came to himself” the scripture says. And he began to pine for that place he’d left, for the father he’d treated so callously.

This prodigal son is a figure that some of us can surely identify with. In his journey to a distant land we see our own wild misadventures. Our own poor choices. Our own squandering of inheritance, and damaging of relationships.

We too can make a royal mess of our lives. And it’s only when we find ourselves exposed and vulnerable that finally we are forced to admit the foolishness of our ways.



But what about the other boy, the older one, who made no such mistakes? The one who didn't request his inheritance, but received it anyway? The one who showed a more responsible side of who he was – working diligently, behaving respectably.

There was no wild adventure, no loose living, no squandering of family wealth or reputation. He was a model son. The boy who made good. And knew it.



He was not pleased with his younger brother's shenanigans. And he was certainly not pleased when his father threw a party to welcome that scoundrel home. Look what the younger son was given: Best robe in his father's closet, a ring on his finger, shoes on his dirty, blistered feet! And worst of all ... the family's prize calf, triple A grade, fattened and ready for market. Now slaughtered to waste on this ne'er-do-well, pseudo-repentant brother. The nerve of it!

There are some of us who will surely identify with this older brother. Because he was correct in everything he said. The younger brother had done wrong, while the older brother had served his father well. It was plain for all to see.

The unfairness of this was overwhelming. "Here I have served you all these years, never disobeyed your command. I've sat in this pew year in and year out. And now you want me to give my blessing to this?"

We too, find it difficult to accept that such persons can be welcomed. It brings the entire household into disrepute.



And now, let me ask: Which of these children are you? The younger one who went astray? The older one who stayed to serve?

For myself, I see something of both. Most often I think I'm the older child. I like the idea of staying home, and being faithful. I like being right. What I don't like so much is the judgementalism that goes along with it. Or the anger toward others. I long to enter a more carefree, joyful way of life. I long to know – and I mean *really* know in my heart of hearts – that I am loved.

But there are also things in my life, and maybe in yours too, that resemble the younger child. Things I've kept out of sight, so that others may not see the prodigal that lurks within. I too have had my prodigal sprees, to the detriment of my soul, and to others.

Lord help me! Lord help *all* of us! Neither of these children are healthy and well. Both of them are hurt and wounded. Both desperately in need of God's saving grace.



We haven't yet spoken much of the father in this story, have we? He allows both his children to make their choices, and to return to him in their own time.

When the younger son was far away, he remembered how his father treated his servants: "They have bread enough and to spare. But here I perish." As he stumbles down the road to home, the father sees him from a distance, and runs to greet him.

There's a beautiful poem by Timothy Haut that imagines this reunion. I'd like to share it with you. Listen:

A blackbird keeps watch
from the top of a tall cedar,
his feathers glossy
in the early spring sun.
A dusty road
spills from around a bluff,
which casts a long shadow
across the greening fields.
There he comes,
this lean, broken boy
who has spit in the eye
of the world,
who has swaggered as far
from the farm in the boondocks
as his old man's money could take him,
who has danced with the devil
till he was nearly dead.
He is defeated, bent, hungry, lost,
and there is only one road left to try:
Home.
He is afraid
that he has burned all his bridges.
He has nothing good
to show for these months away.
He is prepared for a locked door,
a dead end.
And then he stops in his tracks
at a ruckus up ahead,
stops to grasp this miracle of a thing.
It's the old man himself,
racing through the dusty sunlight,
arms wide, crazy with love.



Tears stream down his wrinkled face
in pure, plain joy.
"My son," he blubbers
into the boys tangled hair.
Even the blackbird knows
that this is heaven,
or as close as it gets around here.
He fluffs his warm feathers.
Sings, sings.¹



The Father offers a beautiful welcome to his wayward son!
And not only to him but to the older son as well! Look ... a table is
set. A dinner is prepared. The place-setting in front of the pulpit today
is an open invitation, a reminder that there is room for everyone at the
Father's feast. Us included.

It's not a matter of being good enough. It's a matter of the Father's loving embrace.
Didn't Jesus himself eat with tax collectors and sinners? There were some who disapproved, of
course. But Jesus kept an open table. All are welcome. No distinctions made.

"Mustn't they repent?" we ask. "In time," the Father says. "But you must allow my
love to change them. It is love alone that has power to transform our lives." Bit by bit, day by
day. We are still becoming God's new creation.

This meal is a kingdom meal. It points toward a heavenly
feast, long promised. A meal Jesus said he would share one day with
all of his disciples. See the bread and wine also on display this
morning? Over there, on the other side. They speak of the costliness
of God's love. This is how much the Heavenly Father, the God of
Jesus, loves you.



"In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself," writes the apostle Paul, "not
counting their trespasses against them. ... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin,
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. ... We entreat you on behalf of
Christ," Paul begs us, "be reconciled to God."



We call this the story of the prodigal son. But what *is* a prodigal? Do you remember
the definition? "Recklessly wasteful," we said.

¹ "Proidgal," by Timothy Haut, 2010. Shared on Midrash email list, March 4, 2013.

But here's another possibility, a second definition. Are you ready? To be prodigal is "having or giving something on a lavish scale."

So I'd like to propose another way of thinking about this parable. The *father* is the real prodigal here! It is he that is giving on a lavish scale.

Oh, I know, the younger son spent lavishly too. But his spending led to ruin. The father's, however, brings reconciliation, healing, and new life. Gifts given in abundance. Love spent recklessly, maybe even wastefully. But look at what it does!



"Kill the fatted calf," the father says. "Let us eat and make merry." It will be an extravagant feast, a time of great rejoicing. "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found." It's love that is so extravagant. Forgiveness that is lavish. You may criticize the father for this unexpected generosity.

See the older child, standing outside the door while the sounds of dancing and merriment drift out into the street? He is fuming in anger. Bitter, resentful. Not only toward his brother, but toward his father too. "How *could* you!" he says.

This older child is every bit as lost as his brother. Yet the father pleads with him to come in. He desires *both* his children. "Don't you know?" he says. "You are always with me. And all that is mine is yours." God has always loved this older child. Loves him now as much as ever. Even in this moment of hard-hearted rejection. The door is open. The invitation stands.



God doesn't wait for us to repent. God loves us so we *can* repent. So that we can turn our lives around and become more fully the people God desires us to be. God's love is unconditional. We don't have to earn it, nor are we entitled to it. It just is, and always was, and forever will be. It's the heavenly Father who's the prodigal!

In your bulletin this morning you will find another question for reflection. I hope you'll consider it throughout this coming week. "Who gets to enjoy God's feast today?"

And now may the God of Jesus – the One who rushes out to greet us with wide open arms ... the One who stands by the door waiting patiently for us to come in – may this God seat us together at the heavenly feast of his kingdom.

As you go from this place, may your heart be glad, and may your spirit sing, sing!
Amen.