

Sermon Text – Sunday, March 27, 2022 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**OT Reading: Joshua 5: 9-12, Epistle Reading: 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21,
Gospel Reading: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32**

Prodigal Love

I am guessing you have heard a million and one interpretations of this parable of Jesus. What was Jesus teaching through this story? Is this about forgiveness, mercy, or welcome? Is this about lost and found? There are undertones of shame, guilt, pride, resentment, and anger in this parable as well. Maybe Jesus is teaching about all these things and more. Many bible translations title this as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” which goes back to the fifth century. But, what does that mean to us?

What does prodigal even mean. The dictionary defines ‘prodigal’ as wasteful extravagance, recklessly extravagant, and abundantly lavish – these things sound better than they actually are. Notice reckless and wasteful are both words with negative implications. We can consider both the younger son and the father in this parable recklessly extravagant. The younger son’s deeds are obvious – he squandered his entire inheritance recklessly. The father too squandered the fattened calf and a day’s work to celebrate the return of his son – at least in the eyes of the older brother this was reckless. But then the older brother is not so innocent in this parable either – he squanders his relationship with the father and younger brother by refusing to join the celebration. I wonder if a more fitting name for this parable could be “The Prodigal Family.” But, just for the sake of accuracy, Jesus does not mention ‘prodigal’ at all in this story and maybe we don’t need a title to the tale.

Jesus seems to be responding to what the Pharisees and teachers of the law had muttered. So, I wonder what the Pharisees thought of this story? I wonder if they, like us, thought the image of the father compared to their image of God? I wonder if they would have considered it a good thing for God [their God] to recklessly lavish gifts on the younger son without asking penance for his bad deeds. But, maybe they were proud to associate themselves with the older brother in this story judging both the father and the younger brother.

Fortunately, I don’t want to talk about who we can identify with in this parable – because if we stopped to really consider that we know there have probably been times in our lives and in the life of this church when we could identify with each of the characters to some degree. What I do want to explore is why Jesus felt this was a suitable illustration at the time and what it means for us today. How does this parable change lives and challenge our established ways of thinking and living?

There are different ways to look at and learn from this parable and I question whether we have learned everything there is to learn. Jesus told parables to get the people thinking, they were meant to

provoke and disturb the traditional beliefs of the time. Jesus, in telling parables, asks the listener to think. In her book *Short Stories by Jesus* Amy Jill Levine writes,

What makes the parables mysterious, or difficult, is that they challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives. They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known, but refuse to acknowledge. Our reaction to them should be one of resistance rather than acceptance.¹

In what ways would you think this parable changes lives? How might it have changed the lives of the Pharisees and the disciples of Jesus' time?

Jesus, through this and the other shorter parables in Luke 15, addresses the comment made by the Pharisees – “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (v 2). Luke writes this as if the Pharisees thought this was an unsavory thing to do – why would they think that? Well, remember who the Pharisees are, the name is derived from the “Aramaic *perish*, pl. *parishaya*, Hebrew *parush*, pl. *perushim*, meaning “separate,” or “separatists².”” These men kept themselves away from the ‘common’ people to keep ritual purity. They actually held themselves above the common people that Jesus associated with, so for them it was a problem that Jesus didn’t appear to do the same.

Consequently, Jesus tells this story and at first glance it seems to be a story of forgiveness and we think that the message is one of forgiveness – the father forgiving the discretions of the younger son and welcoming him home with celebration. Is Jesus telling the Pharisees that these sinners deserve forgiveness and that is why he eats with them? We don’t know for sure that the father forgives his younger son or the older son for being so stubborn. We do know that the older son is not in a forgiving mood. But that’s not the whole story – has the younger son repented or has he just reverted back to his old ways and used his words to again manipulate his father? Can there be forgiveness without repentance? If this is a story merely about forgiveness, why did Jesus mention the older brother at all?

Jesus is not ‘prodigal’ when it comes to his parables. Jesus is careful about the words he uses and the way he uses them. I think it’s important that Jesus begins with these words, “There was a man who had two sons.” Two sons – Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob – these sons had histories of strife but [except for Cain and Abel] when reconciliation was necessary, they came together for a common purpose. In each story there is forgiveness – God even gave Cain a mark of

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. Harper One. 2014. p. 3

² Schiffman, Laurence H. “Pharisees” *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* 2nd Ed. NRSV. Levine, Amy-Jill & Brettler, Marc Zvi eds. Oxford Press. 2017. 619-622.

protection and maybe that wasn't what we would consider forgiveness, but Cain lived under God's protection. When Abraham died, Ishmael and Isaac reconciled to lay him to rest. When Jacob met Esau the two were able to reconcile despite Esau's vow to murder Jacob in revenge.

What I see in this parable is a family broken and needing restoration and renewal. This is a story that illustrates reckless extravagant love that celebrates what is important – relationship. It is about more than individual relationship although it certainly is a lesson for each of us to do whatever is necessary to reconcile with lost family members. “Don't wait until you receive an apology; you may never get one. Don't wait until you can muster the ability to forgive; you may never find it. Don't stew in your sense of being ignored, for there is nothing that can be done to retrieve the past³.”

This must be more than about individual reconciliation. It is about the restoration of relationship in a much broader scale. Jesus was talking to the Pharisees who had separated themselves from the society they lived in. The message for them was to put aside their legalistic attitudes and “welcome” the lost without exacting a price. Jesus' parable, if they understood it, would remind them that they too are called to reconciliation. In this parable, Jesus may be talking to us individually as well as part of the body of Christ – the church.

Today our scriptures speak of a ministry of reconciliation. Paul writes to the Corinthians that it was God who reconciled to us through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. We are ambassadors for Christ. And as we read from the Old Testament book of Joshua – when their wandering in the wilderness was over, God reconciled with the people of Israel fulfilling the promise of eating from their own land – the land of Canaan. After generations of oppression in Egypt and decades in the wilderness, the people were restored to wholeness in a land they could inhabit and cultivate.

The message to the church is the same as the message to the Pharisees – put aside your legalistic attitudes and welcome others without exacting a price. This is an illustration of the ‘prodigal’ love we receive from God and from Jesus. Jesus took our punishment and reconciled us to God. Jesus paid the price for our reconciliation – death. Welcome those who are different, who may be struggling, and those who, like that younger son, are returning from their ‘prodigal’ ways. These are the hard things that are involved in loving our neighbor and each other.

How does this change us? How does a church overcome differences and become reconciling? I think the answer is in thinking about what we have been hearing from scripture over the past few weeks. We minister to each other, through care and prayer. We have been learning about the role of elders and deacons through bible study and some teaching with volunteers but also through the

³ Levine, Amy-Jill *Short Stories By Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. Harper One. 2014. p. 75
Kraus - 3 of 4

messages heard on Sunday mornings. Elders and deacons play a vital role in the ministry of reconciliation.

The ministry of reconciliation is about more than forgiveness although that is a part of what I see in reconciliation. In the church it is about setting aside differences and not holding grudges. It is about giving second, third, and even fourth or fifth chances for reconciliation. It is about being Christ-like in how we treat each other and our neighbors in the community. The ministry of reconciliation is recognizing that we are not on an island but a single church that is part of a network of churches in a community with churches of different denominations but all serving the same people. That means we can help people without being concerned with what church they call home, and if they don't have a church home, we can minister to them without asking a commitment to be a part of this church. We can be Christ to those who need Christ without exacting a fee.

Reconciliation is about love – God's steadfast love and the love we have for each other. Like the father in this parable, God watches and waits patiently for the return of the lost – and we are all lost. God's 'prodigal' love is without judgment and available to all who accept it. The church, as ambassadors for Christ, has the privilege of sharing that 'prodigal' love with the community. We learned in last week's Sunday School from Michael B. Curry that "In the end, this parable points to the great embrace and deep expansive love, compassion, and justice of God, deeper, wider, and higher than our imaginings."⁴ As the body of Christ we get to share that love, that compassion, and that justice with each other and with our neighbors.

We are changed through the work of care and visitation, outreach ministries, and what the elders and deacons do for this congregation every day. We change as we take part in a ministry of reconciliation and welcome home lost and wandering ones in God's prodigal fashion, sharing a love that is nonjudgmental and without cost. This knowledge changes us and we can rest – giving care and receiving care from the body of Christ.

⁴ Curry, Michael B. "Homiletical Perspective." from *Feasting on the Word Curriculum Fourth Sunday in Lent*. Westminster John Knox. 2019.