

Message Delivered at Christ Church
March 13th & 14th, 2010
TEXT: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

The message was preceded by Keith Tan singing "The Prodigal," originally performed by Eden's Bridge on their CD "Celtic Worship." As well, a rendering of Rembrandt's "Prodigal Son" was displayed on the screen.

So there once was a man with two sons; the younger of whom was possessed by the wanderlust of youth. He desired to go off on his own, as is our wont when we reach a certain age. One can hardly blame him. All of us reach that point. But sometimes our desire for independence expresses itself in the most ruthless of ways. So it was for him. To fund his new life, he asks for half his father's inheritance. Except that his father is still alive. It is, possibly, the cruelest thing to say to another "I wish you were dead." But as he prances into the sunset, with half his father's life jangling in his backpack, that is exactly what this youngest son has said...to his father.

He is incontinent; unable to restrain his own lust and desire; to the point that it is all gone; nothing is left. He wastes it all, leaving him all alone, far from home, feeding the pigs and jealous of their fare. He has become as unclean as one can be.

He decides to return home, and for the life of me I can't figure out whether it's because he truly regrets how hurtful he has been towards his father or because he's just hungry. I know his speech begins with "I have sinned against heaven and before you." But I just can't quite figure out whether it's a speech born of a remorseful heart, or calculating words designed to get him a job on his father's farm and save his own hide. At my most hopeful, I want to believe that he has changed. But his character is such that I also wonder whether his decision to return home is just one more manifestation of a self-indulgent heartlessness.

Were I doing my own personal Bible reflection rather than giving a message, here is where I would stop and ask myself why this question about the prodigal son's motive matters so much to me...

Because another, older son, lurks in this story. Rigidly well-behaved, every hair on his head is held mercilessly in place. It's better to do the right things than the wrong things. That's for sure. But duty is not the same thing as love; and sometimes it is possible to be away without going anywhere.

He has worked well, if somewhat joylessly, for his father all these years for a reason that appears to have nothing to do with affection or even a sense of a job well done. He has done all that is right, and prided himself in his selflessness. He has worked the farm; kept track of the stock; overseen the farmhands; ordered the accounts; been his father's right hand man. All is managed with cool efficiency, and "Yes, father" drips from his lips with reptilian warmth.

Propriety and rectitude are their own rewards, but can also create their own prisons. And he is in prison. So close to the father who would share all that he has, the poor soul has never even had a goat to celebrate with this friends. Considering the character of his father, my hunch is that it's because he's never asked.

He is the most complicated of these three characters, and the least endearing. Few of us find either self-righteousness or self-pity attractive personality traits. There are scores of paintings of the son who goes away; and we just heard a song about the prodigal. I don't know of any songs or paintings about the elder son. He is also the most dangerous of the three

characters, for I would suggest most of us are more likely to keep our distance not through reckless living but through stern eyes and arms justly crossed.

There are two sons in this story, though we never call it the parable of the Elder Son. We usually call it the parable of the Prodigal Son. Really, of course, it's the parable of the Prodigal Father.

To be prodigal is to be lavish and extravagant; and the father in this story—and we all know who this father stands in for—is lavish in more than one way.

He is extravagant in allowing his children to go their own way. The younger son he allows to go; and in the psychological language of today even enables his foolishness. There are lots of crazy things in this story, but that this father actually gives his son his half of the inheritance to spend on dissolute living, as the story says, may be among the craziest. The elder son he allows to follow his own path of lostness, for in the end what's a mother or father to do?

Being a parent is a lifelong process of letting go, and decreasing that one's children might increase; and there really is no choice in the matter. The crucial question around how our parents let go of us; or—if we are parents ourselves—we let go of our own children is never an “if” question. It's a “how” question. The wisest of mothers and fathers know that there comes a point when there is no stopping their children being who they've always been. It's a process that begins as early as the first “no” a two year-old dares to utter; and may culminate in our parents watching us tread the path of foolish profligacy or heartless isolation, hoping only that God might protect us and bring us home.

But the lavishness we all know about is how the father welcomes them back...and we focus on the younger son, but it's the elder son who gets welcomed back, too.

I'm probably pointing out to you something that you already know about this parable...but a startling piece to this whole story is how the father goes out to meet both his sons. The father goes out. He sees his youngest son, barely recognizable he is so changed, moving across the fields or coming down the road...and he gets off the front porch and runs to meet him. How undignified for an old man to run, especially to one who deserves only justice. But most of us understand how he feels, so we know why he does it. It's been decades since he's run to catch his child in his arms and swing him around. But the years mean nothing now. The younger son begins the speech he's been practicing, but the father doesn't have time for that and cuts him off because he's just not that interested. There are robes to be brought out, and rings to put on, and calves to be killed, and parties to get started! Life is too short for the maudlin, and when the one who is lost is finally found there can be nothing but making a seat at the table.

What it is over the years that has kept the two sons separate from one another is not part of the story. And why it is the elder son is not retrieved from the fields is open to conjecture. But sometimes mothers and father do know that the most delicate acts of reconciliation take time, and best be treated gingerly. If there's going to be a scene, it is best that it not ruin the party.

So when the elder son returns—at least in body, if not in spirit—his father goes out again...this time, to plead. He pleads with his child, a gesture no less undignified than that of running down a road. We love one character more than the other. That is not true of the father. Both—all—mean more to him than he can say; and if the only way to get them to the table is to go and get them—in one case to run, in another case to plead--that's exactly what he does. Because he truly does want his children to be home.

And we all want to be able to go home, don't we...

It's an elemental yearning. Life is sometimes cruel, and we get discarded, or pushed away, or left outside. When it happens, we put on a show, and act real big...but it makes us ache inside; and hope for arms that enfold us, and welcome us home, and give us a seat at the table, and throw us a party...whether we've wandered in the classically prodigal way; or done everything right, but still know in our souls only darkness and cold.

Well, my friends...welcome to the party. God is throwing a party again this morning, and you're invited. Right here.

Every week we're here together we read scripture; and say the Creed; and sing and say our prayers...all things we've talked about in worship during this Lent...but at the heart of our worship is this feast, and this table, and this celebration.

In a few minutes we'll do what we'll always do...bring the gifts forward; and pray over the bread and wine that they may be for us the Body and Blood of Christ. We'll break the bread, and share it. And we invite all of us to come forward—every single one of us--no matter what. We do so because true hospitality sets no precondition on the guest; and we do so because it's the kind of hospitality Jesus offers; and we do so because we all need it, ourselves. "Just come on," Jesus says. "Don't worry about making a speech." The doors are open, and the Lord's arms are waiting.

So we'll get out of our seats; and jostle around; and it may be a bit loud and chaotic; and some of us are big, and some of us are small, and some of us are so tiny we need to be carried. Some of us are in good moods, and some of us are in bad moods. Some of us are focused, and some of us have wandering minds. Some of us are joyful, or hopeful, or peaceful; and some of us are afraid we've squandered our legacy or erected around ourselves walls impermeable to everything except the extravagant grace of God. We are all sorts and conditions.

But you know, it makes no difference. No matter what, the Prodigal God wants us to come forward.

While tons have been written about what the Lord's Supper means—and while Christians throughout the ages have spilled much ink, and occasionally blood, over what actually happens when we pray over the elements--at the very least this action of communion is the weekly reminder of God's invitation to—in the words of Jesus--come unto him, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, for he will refresh you. At the very least, to receive from this table is to participate in God's eternal hospitality, and welcome, and rejoicing.

Because everybody wants to be able to come home; everybody wants open arms at the end of the driveway; everybody, after working in the fields, wants to know they are welcome.

It's primal. And if you want to know why we do communion at every worship service, it's so that at every worship service we get a chance to know it and live it one more time.

And if you want to know why we always keep this space open; and re-arrange our lives...including change our Saturday worship time...to create a home for our CARITAS guests next week; and welcome into this building the seven different AA and Al-Anon groups that meet here throughout the week; or take an extra couple minutes before a worship service to put on a nametag...it's because of this table. It's because we've each been lonely in the middle of the night; or been homeless ourselves; or need the healing of fellowship; or been a stranger whose only hope is a warm reception; because we've each either been the Prodigal, or the Elder Son, or something in between...and because no matter what, Jesus welcomes us at this table.

Hospitality is an ancient practice. In its truest form, it gives the other space to be who they are. Which, in the end, is like the one more lavish action of the father in this story...for the father does not welcome his sons back for the purpose of them being made different. He doesn't

welcome them back to get something out of them, or make them into something. They aren't a project; or something to be fixed. He doesn't do it because of what might come next. He just does it. And based on the story, we do not know whether they are changed. We don't know what the "result" is. But I'm just not sure we're supposed to worry too much about that. Our job is just to be a little bit like the father in this story and do it, and then let God do what God will do.

So we'll say our prayers, and share in the table, and sing some songs. And then we'll be done, and walk into the rest of the week. May it be a week where we give and experience welcoming arms and warm smiles. But there is a chance we may also receive cold shoulders and ugly glances that say to us "you don't belong here." And if that happens, just know we'll be here again next week, doing exactly what we're doing this week...attending God's party, coming to the table no matter what, and bringing it all—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Because it is true that not only does the Prodigal Jesus take all those things, he actually goes out to get us.

And if it is in your own life you wonder whether you actually can go home again, in God's economy you most definitely, and eternally, can. Ask the Prodigal Son. Or ask the Elder Brother. Or just ask the person sitting next to you.