

The Rev. Dr. Eric O. Springsted
Georgetown Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC
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The Prodigal Father

Text: St. Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Whenever we come upon one of Jesus' parables in the gospels, I suspect that we breathe a little sigh of relief. Here is something we can finally understand, we say to ourselves. Here is an illustration that is pithy and entertaining and is full of common sense. And because it is common sense, it is a tale meant to be understood by all.

This, however, is not at all what Jesus' parables are really like. They are not common sense illustrations, easily comprehended. Instead, they are meant to violate and shake up our all too common sense, not to confirm it. Why should we think it to be otherwise? After all, common sense, not only is not very common, but is also rarely very deep, and is not capable by itself of producing a peaceable and loving world. What Jesus was trying to do was to make us see things differently, and sometimes that requires violating common sense.

That the parables are meant to confuse in this way, that they are meant to shake up our normal expectations, is perfectly in line with who Jesus himself was, too. In his life, Jesus challenged common sense, and proposed wild, unheard of alternatives. For example, rather than treating women as cattle and property, he openly welcomed them, and all kinds of women for that matter; he counted them among his disciples. Rather than treating sinners and tax collectors and lepers as things, as beings to be shunned the way that everybody else did, he called them brothers and sisters. Since his life was lived as an alternative way of living life it should not be surprising that his teachings would follow the same pattern.

There are few better illustrations of how the parables of Jesus violate and shake up our

common expectations than the parable of the prodigal son. It is, however, a parable that we have domesticated and tailored to our understanding. It, we think, confirms our sense of what a father's goodness ought to be, and endorses our resentment of the cold and unwelcoming attitude of the older brother who had no joy in his brother's return. But there is a lot more to it than that.

Think first about the situation. Initially, the son asks his father for his inheritance. Now, there is only one way to get an inheritance and that is to become fatherless. So what the son is in effect doing is saying to his father, "Old man, you don't count anymore. As far as I am concerned, you're dead. I have more right to the fruit of your labor than you do." Second, even if we can bring ourselves to see the giving of an inheritance before one dies as something normal, something perhaps to capitalize a bright and ambitious young son in his ventures, think about what the son did by taking the hard won fruits of his father's labor to a pagan country and spending it, wasting it, in all sorts of activities that would have been repulsive to his father. Even if the son had not already become estranged from his father by asking for the inheritance ahead of time, he obviously didn't care a whit for his father and what his father stood for when he spent the inheritance in the way he did. Surely they would have been estranged after *that*. In fact, the simple point that the son ended up tending pigs in a foreign land shows how far he had given up his father's life, for nothing could have been farther from a Jew's life than that. The son had, in the end, no matter how you read it, made an enemy of his father and had spit in his face.

A modern parallel is not hard to find and this story can easily be told to us in any number of updated ways where its strikingness could not be missed. It might, for example, be the story of a daughter who runs with the wrong crowd, gets into drugs and chooses a life of prostitution. Or it might be a story such as the one that we find in the movie of the 1980s, *Wall Street*. There the son of a hard working mechanic who is his union's representative becomes a Wall Street take-

over specialist and who, as such, is instrumental in taking over the company for whom his father works, a take-over which means to break up the company and sell off the various pieces. Not only will this put his own father out of work, it will destroy the company his father put his heart and soul into saving. Or it might be the story simply of a child who has gotten into drugs and who begins stealing from his parents in order to support his habit.

Now, if we ever imagine stories like these, we might try to tell ourselves that the child didn't mean it, is merely confused, and that the person we love is really in there somewhere. But in real life imagination can only go so far. Children and parents really do become estranged. They really can end up hating each other, and they have common sense to back them up on that hatred. It is usually a two way street, with the kid as a screw up, and the father, trying to help the kid out, becoming a greater and greater irritant to the kid, who sees the old man as always on his back. The kid feels hassled, the father is frustrated, angry and hurt, because the kid knows exactly how to push his button.

It is in that sort of light that we can begin to see that the story of the prodigal son truly is a violation of our expectations. How in such a situation would *we* react if we were the father? The natural reaction, if things have gone this far, is not, I suspect, when you have been wounded so deeply and hurt so badly to go out and welcome the one who has just victimized you. You might welcome a son who had just gone missing. This kid is trouble, though, and the sight of him on the horizon does not bode well. Yet welcoming him is precisely what the father does.

For those who first heard this story the father's action must have been both shocking and unanticipated. The father does, those first hearers must have thought, what a father should *not* and could *not* have done. If they muttered amongst themselves when they heard the parable, undoubtedly their comments would have run along the lines of saying: "You know, if that were

my kid, I'd have..." They would have doubted the possibility of a lasting reconciliation. It simply isn't in human nature to sit down at the dinner table after all that has passed in the last few years and continue the relationship as if nothing had happened. Try as hard as one might to avoid it, some cutting remark would undoubtedly pass, and the enmity would surface once again. The better solution we might say today would be "tough love." The better solution would *not* be to take the child back without question; it would be to make the child first realize what a jerk he was and make him realize that foolish and cruel actions really do have consequences— serious ones. We would probably say that it is no wonder that the kid turned out that way given that his father was such a pushover; in his own way, the son is only as prodigal as his father is.

Yet, we often don't see the parable in this light. We have instead domesticated it and tailored it to our own vision of the world. We, for example, don't see the parable from the father's perspective and we don't see the shocking thing he does, given the situation. We, instead, try to see it from the son's perspective. We imagine ourselves as the prodigal children in front of God, who, trusting in his benevolence and tenderheartedness, have returned, expecting automatic forgiveness. And, of course, since we rarely see ourselves as *too* prodigal anyhow, we figure it won't cost him very much. It is in the nature of sin to think that it doesn't cost God or us much.

Ironically, reading the parable this way ends up putting us on the side of the older brother. It puts us on that side because if we read the parable this way we are making a distinction between our minor sins, which we think *deserve* forgiveness, and the gross sins of others, which don't deserve it. We think we have a *right* to forgiveness and they have none. To forgive them so fully is a slight to us, we think, for we are not nearly half so bad as they are.

Now, an important reason we read the story this way is because it relieves us of the

responsibility of having to act as the father acted. Yet, if we don't see the father's dilemma as *our* dilemma, we haven't really seen what forgiveness is at all.

Look at another parable about forgiveness, the parable of the unjust steward. The steward is forgiven a huge debt by his master but then turns around and demands pennies from his debtors. The point is that being forgiven obliges us to forgive. If we see ourselves as prodigal children who only have to show up back home to be forgiven, we will fail to see that we, like the father, have to be just as prodigal as he was with love. Too often we expect forgiveness, but then turn around and start saying things like, "If that were my kid, I'd..."

The father's dilemma is therefore the one we ought to pay attention to because his prodigal love for his son is the action Jesus is calling us to have, not only towards our own children, for whom we have some natural affection anyhow, but towards all of our brothers and sisters, some of whom may be our enemies, or who have hurt us very badly, or who stand for things we can't abide. Being the one who forgives in such situations is difficult. But perhaps there is a way of making it easier to swallow, a way that is discovered in the words of the father, the words that say: "This son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and now is found."

When the father says that the son was dead he is not merely engaging in metaphorical exaggeration; instead he is pointing out a strange reversal that has taken place. The son treated the father as if the father were dead, but because of the foolish things he has done it is actually now the son who has lost his life. And when therefore the father says that the son has come back to life, he is not merely saying that the son has come back to his senses and now sees things clearly, that is to say as the father sees them. Instead, the father by his forgiveness has given this dead son new life. For after all, what good would coming back to your senses be without that

forgiveness, without that chance to actually use good sense?

Our natural reaction is to hold grudges, to say “If that were my kid, I’d...” The point of the parable is that, natural or not, if we don’t give our grudges up, the people we have refused to forgive will not have life. On the other hand, if we forgive them, then they have life because we have made room for them. They will have it because we gave it to them without resentment..

Now, of course, it surely is a very big question whether or not they will actually accept that freely given life or not. It is a question whether the prodigal son was really sorry for what he had done or whether he was merely feeling sorry for himself. Only time will tell. But to the father who sees that unless he, the father, forgives, the boy will not live, that doesn’t really matter. The father is prodigal in his love because unless he is, the child simply dies.

Often we criticize people for playing God. If we take this parable seriously that should never be a real criticism, that is, at least, if people were *really* to play God, for playing God is exactly what we should do. For just as God is prodigal with his love and forgiveness so that we might have life, so we should also be prodigals with our love and forgiveness for others in order that we might give them life. God in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ has been prodigal with his love toward us, perhaps doing so without knowing ahead of time whether or not we are sincere. His love is not wasted though when we accept that love by being in turn prodigal in our love towards others; his love is not wasted when we, like him, are willing to waste our love to give others lives that they have lost because of what they owe us.