

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 130: 1-4
SECOND LESSON: Luke 15:11-32
March 27, 2022
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

“The Prodigal Father”
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This story is so familiar to us that we almost stop hearing it. So I am going to ask you to do two things today. First, pretend you have NEVER heard this story before. Second, imagine yourself back in 1st century Palestine. I can't help you with the first bit, but I'll give you some background for the second.

The normal social expectations of the time are as follows: The first son always got double the inheritance of all other sons, and daughters also had to be provided for. The larger the family, the smaller the individual inheritance. BUT, unless the circumstances were very unusual and the parent decided to do it, sons were not given their inheritance while the father was still living. The initiative was always with the father. ASKING for your inheritance now was the equivalent of telling dad to drop dead. Furthermore, leaving was not acceptable. An adult child was expected to stay and care for parents. And selling property away from the family was **really** not acceptable. It was an act of betrayal. Inheriting land does not mean you have the right to dispose of it. In an ultimate sense it always “belongs” to the family. So, what the younger son did was this:

- He usurped the place of his father in the matter of inheritance.
- He told his father he didn't care if he “dropped dead.”
- He abandoned his responsibility to care for his father in his old age.
- He broke the family apart by leaving.
- And if he sold land in order to leave, he betrayed his heritage, lineage and wider family group.

Basically, the actions of this young man were enough to guarantee anyone seeing him within 20 feet of the village picking up a rock and hurling it at him. He had crossed the point of no return, not just once, but many times. He was persona non grata in the extreme. Adding the riotous living among Gentiles and feeding pigs was enough icing on the cake to make it better if he had never been born.

We call him the prodigal son because the word means extravagant, lavish or wasteful, but in this story, it is not only the son who is prodigal. The father is too. Because if you live in 1st century Palestine, which by now you do, you will know that this father's behavior is bizarre. The father appears to be reckless and indulgent in the extreme. He did not have to give in to his son and do as asked. Just because someone asks us to do something doesn't mean we have to do it. My children have asked for a lot of things over the years that they

had a snowball's chance in a very hot place of ever being given. And yet this father didn't even quibble. He just divided things up and gave his younger son what he asked for! And it's not like this son was exactly trustworthy. Dad should have known better, because not long after getting his inheritance he turned everything into cash, traveled to a distant country and squandered everything in wild living. Basically, he went to Vegas and blew it all. This could have been foreseen. The older brother probably would have been well aware of his younger brother's tendencies. But the father appears to be incredibly naïve.

To add insult to injury, the father then turns around and acts like a mother. Of course, since you now live in the 1st century, you're aware of this. There is no mother in this story. The father does what a mother traditionally does. He keeps an eye out hoping against hope his son will return, and when he sees him in the distance, he runs out to greet him. This is not just wild enthusiasm on his part. This guy has to get to his son before any of the people from town spot him. If seen he's likely to be stoned on the spot. And he lifts up his garments and runs! This is completely undignified! No father would do this. A mother might, but not a father.

The son barely has his apology out of his mouth before his father is working to fully reinstate him as a son. The townspeople might not like it, but they would not attack him if the father restored his status in the form of a robe, ring and sandals. But this is appallingly permissive! Are there no consequences?! Shouldn't he have to earn his way back slowly, in stages? The prodigal son asked to be taken back as a hired hand, which is about the status of a temp worker. There was no security in this role, no belonging to the family. The slaves had a higher rank than that. But it was the absolute most he thought he could ask for, and we all sitting around hearing this story agree. Some of us think he should just be thrown out on his ear. Instead, he is **completely restored!**

By now we're shaking our heads. The father in this story is nuts. This ungrateful selfish wretch of a son has returned, and dad throws a party. Dad clearly needs an intervention. This is just not what you do. He actually had the fatted calf killed. Meat was not eaten every day and killing the fatted calf meant feeding a lot of people. It meant that the father intended to invite the whole town. Which he probably did, because it was an effective way of protecting his errant son from being attacked. It was a way of sending a message without speaking a word.

Meanwhile, while the party is going on no one has bothered to tell the conscientious older brother who has been out working in the field. He comes in tired and dirty, finds out what's going on, and he is steamed. He refuses to go in and be part of the celebration. Instead, his father comes out to him, and he explodes saying, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" And we are cheering the older son on. We agree with him 100%. The older son is our hero. Maybe Jesus is going to turn this story around and the father will see at this point that he made a mistake in accepting the youngest back with

no conditions? But then we can't help but noticing another problem that makes us a bit uneasy. We understand why the older brother is angry and we sympathize with him, but he too shows disrespect towards his father by refusing to come in. **And in going out to him once more dad turns into mom!** *This is just NOT how it is supposed to work.* It's supposed to be mom who goes out to negotiate with her son and plead with her husband. Mom is the mediator. Mom is the one for whom love, not pride, is the driving force.

The father does not reject his older son any more than he rejects his younger son. He tries to persuade him that this is not a situation where there has to be a winner and a loser. There is room for both. The faithful older brother will still inherit everything he would have inherited before. But as far as we can tell the older brother does not want to hear about it. As for what comes next, no one knows, because the story stops there.

It's time for us to admit it. Regardless of what era we are in, we're all on the side of the older brother. That younger brother is a total jerk, and we don't trust him as far as we can throw him. Sure, he **says** he's sorry, but how do we really know? Those of us who have worked hard and done the right thing with very little by way of recognition or thanks are not at all happy to see the family ne'er-do-well welcomed with open arms. It's just not fair. But that is what God's grace is all about—GRACE is given to all. GRACE is not fair.

We live life as if everything were a zero-sum game, which in case you don't know what that is, it's when one person or group can only gain something if someone else loses it. It happens all the time with budgets. We can't give a big increase to public parks without pulling it from schools, libraries or the police. The money has to come from somewhere and there is only so much to go around. But God does not function this way. God does not have limitations. God can love everyone deeply, and God's love for one person does not mean that another will suffer a deficit. God can extend grace to those who have made a complete mess of their lives and can do so without slighting the faithful.

Jesus told this story in the context of being criticized for spending time among "sinners" and outcasts. He went to their homes and social gatherings. He associated with some pretty shady characters. And many of them responded and turned their lives around. But the establishment had no place for them. The respectable religious community had no room for the people God restored. But we must. Because regardless of the nature of our sins, we are all sinners. The older brother was just as much in need of grace as the younger brother. We all need to be welcomed home. Amen.

Psalm 130: 1-4

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;

² Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

³ If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

Luke 15:11-32

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”