

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
March 14, 2010, Journey Worship Service (8:45 am)
“The Prodigal Sons”
Luke 15:11-32

If you stop and think about it, we all live our parables just about every day of our lives. For example, I bet this past week some of you lived out the Parable of the Excellent Driver Stuck Behind the Worst Driver in the World, or perhaps the Parable of the Pothole and the Ruined Front Tire, the Parable of the Elderly Parent and the Concerned Children, and my personal favorite, the Parable of the Children Who Won't Clean Up Their Rooms and the Parent Who Is Threatening to Ground Them For Life.

The gospel story for today is one of the best known parables in the entire bible. However it is not really the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but the Parable of the Prodigal Sons (plural). And I'll tell you now where I'm going to end up: The moral of the story is that there is a condition worse than death, which is to be utterly lost; and there is a condition better than life, which is to be lovingly found.

Let's start at the beginning. There was once a father who had two sons. Both failed to maintain a right relationship with their father and ended up living in distant places, one of them literally, the other one emotionally. In effect, they were each guilty of the same two sins and only when they recognized their waywardness could they make their way back home. The first sin of the Prodigal Sons is the inordinate love of money and material things. Now, this sin is more prominently on display in the life of the younger brother – the one who asked for his inheritance in advance, which basically amounted to one-third of his father's estate (since the elder brother would get a double portion). Since the father's wealth was linked to property and livestock, he would have had to convert some of it into cold, hard cash – which was then given to the young man who “squandered it in dissolute living.”

Now, at this point, church folk hope the minister might go into vivid detail about the type of terrible, wanton life the younger son led – in effect turning the pulpit into one of those tabloid racks in the grocery store whose titles we furtively read while waiting to pay for our groceries. (Admit it; we all glance at those magazines!) But we miss the point if we think this parable is just a warning against wild living, binge drinking, and prostitutes. The story would be just as true if the prodigal son had left with his share of the inheritance and bought a mining company and made a vast fortune in some foreign land. The bottom line is that in both versions, money became a device that separated the son from loving and being responsible to his father. Yes, the father in the parable is a symbol for our heavenly Father; but in this case, money was the true Lord of the young man's life and as he walked away with his inheritance, nothing else mattered. That was what made him a prodigal son.

OK, how many of you noticed something different on your credit card bills this past month? Due to a new federal law, credit card companies have to show you in writing how long it will take for you to pay off your current credit card debt if you only pay the minimum amount each month and don't add any additional charges onto it. It can be a frightening picture of decades-long indebtedness. Now brace yourself – it gets worse. Here are some scary statistics. In 2008, the average household had over five credit cards and was carrying a household credit card debt of over \$10,600. Imagine how long it would take to pay that off if you only paid the minimum each month! And if you ran a credit report for these households, they would have between 10-14 debt obligations listed, including credit cards, mortgages, auto loans, student loans, and others. Hard times and bad choices equally send us as prodigals into lands far away from home, far from where we want to be. And stuck in those distant places, it can be downright impossible to live faithfully and at peace.

What about the other son, the one who stayed at home? Let's consider another statistic. In recent years, most households gave about \$2,000 to charities, with religious organizations being the main beneficiaries. That amount dropped a bit in the recent recession. But the sobering fact is that in any given year, just over 30% of the households gave less than \$25 to charity. Now think about the elder brother in the parable. From the little we're told about him, he seemed to be the type of person who knew the cost of everything but the value of nothing. Yes, it's true that he stayed and worked on the family estate while the younger brother left with his share of the inheritance. The elder son clearly hated seeing potential resources being squandered by his kid brother. So when prodigal #1 returned, the elder brother was quick to bemoan the injustice of killing the fatted calf for a homecoming party, since he'd never received even a young goat for a celebration of his own. The elder brother might have used his money more prudently than the younger, but money was just as much of a wedge between himself and his father, since he chose to live tight-fistedly and close-heartedly, rather than with open hands and a faithful spirit. So both were prodigal sons.

If the brothers' first sin was inordinate materialism, their second, graver sin was the lack of gratitude. The younger son rejected all his father had done for him by basically saying, "Dad, you are more valuable to me dead than alive. Give me my inheritance now." In taking this money early, the boy was essentially turning his back on his father's name and legacy. In spending all that had connected him back home, prodigal #1 quickly go lost in the world.

Prodigal #2, however, is an even clearer example of ingratitude. When he heard about the "Welcome Home" party for his dead-now-alive brother, he threw a tantrum. When his father came out to see what was wrong, the brother was quick to distance himself from his family, referring to his brother as "that son of yours." But his true colors were flown when he talked angrily about how he had faithfully served his father for many years – although the word he used to describe his service can be translated as "slavery." Here he was, the elder son, destined to receive the lion's share of his father's inheritance, but he considered all his work to be less than that of his father's hired

hands. There was more than just sibling rivalry going on here; some long-smoldering spark of resentment and bitterness had finally burst into destructive flames.

Earl Roberts is a wise Montana farmer who is known for his one-liners. In addition to the Ten Commandments, Earl would add an eleventh: *If you can't be thankful for what you've got, you can't handle anymore.* Ingratitude is something that afflicts all of us because we tend to think of ourselves as the center of the universe. Like the imperfect astronomers before Copernicus and Galileo, we think all of life orbits around us. It certainly feels that way since all our information about the world around us comes to us through our personal senses. It's a short step from believing we are the center of life to expressing ingratitude towards others who share space with us in the orbits of life.

Ingratitude can become a way of life. It may show itself by running away from home, never calling our parents, or simply not concerning ourselves about what happens to others, strangers, friends and family alike. Ingratitude can also be present without running away from home at all – when complaining becomes more enjoyable than changing, when blaming is easier than honest self-reflection and confession. It is quite possible to find ourselves standing outside in the shadows, while our heavenly Father's celebration is going on right behind the open door near at hand.

The sin of materialism requires a new heart and a spirit of generosity aimed at others. Likewise, the sin of ingratitude requires a contrite heart and a spirit of thanksgiving aimed at others. Fail to do these two steps and you can be a prodigal son whether you live in another time zone or reside right under the same roof as everyone else in your family. We don't know how the parable in Luke's gospel turned out. The younger son appeared to re-discover himself in the loving embrace of his father, and took part in the estate-wide celebration thrown in his honor. The elder son was last seen scowling in the dark outside the festivities. Perhaps he went in and re-discovered what it means to be part of a faithful family. Perhaps he stayed out, choosing to worship false gods of pride and possessions.

The problem with prodigals is not that they run away physically, but that they run away spiritually. Both sons were guilty of that. So are we in many ways, if we're honest with ourselves. Oscar Wilde once said, "The problem is not in what we do but in what we become." Lent is the season to reflect on prodigals as well as on the restoration of prodigals. Worse than death itself, which is over and one with, is the quality of being lost, which can happen to us in a foreign land or close at hand if we're not careful. And better than just living, getting by, paying the bills, is actually *being found* – embraced by the father who sees us as we repent and return home, who wants us to unclench our spirits and come join in the celebration so we too can find our true selves again.

Remember that you are living out parables every day of your life. So where are you in this story? Dead or alive? Lost or found? Prodigal #1, #2 or beloved Child of God?

AMEN