

Prodigals and Prodigious Gift

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The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of my favourites. I expect it rests deeply in most of you as well. I remember it from my earliest days in Sunday School with flannelgraph images of muddy pigs, the hungry and sad prodigal, the outstretched arms of the joyous father, and the scowling older brother. As our preaching theme of Growing in God turns from “abiding” to “recovering” I felt the most appropriate illustration of recovering was the story of the Prodigal Son who returns to his father’s home after being lost. The fifteenth chapter of Luke contains three parables: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost, or Prodigal, Son. In each parable something highly valued is lost. But only in the last one does being lost take on the negative moral hue: the human creature is lost in his prodigality, his immorality, his lavish wastefulness, his lack of care for his inheritance. Yet in each, the one who highly values the lost creature is overjoyed when it is found. While the joy is perfectly understandable to us in the story of the sheep or the coin, when we encounter it with the prodigal son and his father moral questions arise, don’t they? And those questions are embodied in the older brother, who feels that an injustice is taking place. I want to consider those questions today.

Let us pray: “May these words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts / be pleasing in your sight, / Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.” Amen

First of all, the story begins with the young son at home, asking for his inheritance from his father. His father gives him the financial value of the inheritance and the son leaves with it to go into a distant land. So the first move is to separate himself from the home that surrounds him, provides for him, nurtures him. The son thinks he has the ability—under his own steam—to create his own home now in a different place. But what he creates is false. The new life exists; it is real. But it is not true. And both the world of lavishness and the world of misery he comes to live in, despite being only too real, are false worlds whose reality is an extension of the son’s false image of himself.

Of course the story is a parable, not realistic fiction. What it tells us is that our home is with God; the created world is a gift of his home that God gives us, which we can steward responsibly in praise and thanksgiving. As Psalm 84 puts it:

3 Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young—

a place near your altar,
 LORD Almighty, my King and my God.
 4 Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
 they are ever praising you.

But, like the prodigal, we can also make God's gift to us over in our own image; we can forget its nature as a gift we live within. Unfortunately, such forgetting has the tendency to result in our fouling our own nest.

Thankfully, the younger son comes to his senses: "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you"(Luke 15: 17-18). His recognition here is the same as that in Psalm 84:

1 How lovely is your dwelling place,
 LORD Almighty!

2 My soul yearns, even faints,
 for the courts of the LORD;
 my heart and my flesh cry out
 for the living God. ...

10 Better is one day in your courts
 than a thousand elsewhere;

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
 than dwell in the tents of the wicked. ...

But here a moral question arises, which is probably swirling around in the head of the older brother. How genuine is the prodigal's contrition? He conveniently "remembers" his father's house and turns homeward only once the money runs out and he falls on hard times. Martin Luther would have none of this, saying "such contrition was certainly mere hypocrisy, and did not mortify the lust for sins; for they had to grieve, while they would rather have continued to sin, if it had been free to them" (Smalcald Articles, 1537; see Wikipedia on "Imperfect Contrition"). Despite Luther's adamant tone, however, there is no way he can know with certainty that the contrition is not genuine. In fact, even the prodigal himself cannot know for certain if his contrition is or is not genuine. In all likelihood he feels it to be genuine, but Luther may be right. The prodigal may be fooling himself, hoping for what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." There is just no way to know beyond the not insignificant fact that the prodigal *has* come home and *has* asked to be readmitted.

The older brother is angry at his father's joyous reception of the younger brother. The question of his younger brother's genuine contrition *may* have been in

the older brother's mind. We can be more certain, though, that his anger was at his father's prodigious and, to his mind, unjust generosity. He felt unfairly treated. He feels he deserves more than the prodigal. After all, as he shouts out,

'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!' (Luke 15: 29-30)

In my June 20th devotional called "Abiding Through the Spirit" I said, When it comes to our relationship with God, our tendency to self-centredness and self-preservation can lead us to turn God into an image of ourselves, a God who protects us, serves us, and keeps at bay our enemies and those strange and possibly evil foreigners who threaten our normal way of life. This is what is happening with the older brother. He, like his younger brother, is creating a false world around himself, where his father is reduced to a mechanism for rewarding the son's good behaviour. Notice that he feels threatened by his recovered brother, seeing him as a kind of foreigner that justice should hold at bay. He can't see him as having returned, as having been found, as having been recovered. He is too focused on the gift that the younger son receives despite having been prodigal. What is happening here is that the older brother is on the verge of becoming lost. In fact numerous commentators see two prodigals in this story, both having been lost. Where the younger brother had reduced his father to a limitless source of fuel for his desires, the older brother applies a moral calculus of works to his life and sees his father as well as his brother as falling short. But what does his father say? "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." The older son can't see that his father's gift is sufficient for all, that in his house are many mansions.

What does the example of the father's overwhelming munificence, beneficence, and utter joy upon his son's return offer to us in place of the false images of self and world that the sons create, one of selfish depravity, the other of judgemental morality? I want to repeat the father's words to his older son: "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." Let's take this to heart for a moment—as God's children *we* are *always* with God. As dwellers in God's home *we* receive everything God has. God's gift of grace to us is boundless. But being boundless, it transcends our limited human capacity to comprehend. We can only know God through faith. As Paul says to the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of

God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2: 8-9). What we can come to recognize, through faith, is that God is with us, always; we are always in God’s house. It is *we*—in our self-centred perception of our own power, abilities, moral superiority—who can self-righteously come to think that God reflects our understanding of things, or that God has abandoned us, or that, perhaps, God is not necessary. It is *we* who lose ourselves.

But when we regain our faith, when we find that we have been recovered, what joy abounds! As Paul says to the Romans (15:13): “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Confident in God’s grace, filled with joy and peace, our pilgrim walk through the world is transformed. Listen to Psalm 84:

5 Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

6 As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

7 They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion. ...

We all have our own Valleys of Baka to pass through—arid places of sorrow and weeping. But God’s prodigious gift of grace, through our faith that we live in God’s house, fills such dry valleys with springs, covers them with pools.

So what does such transformation mean when a repentant prodigal appears at our door, or our church’s door, as we pilgrim through life? In his Gospel Luke records that “the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus” (15: 1), while “the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them’” (15: 2). The mutterers, here, are a version of the older brother, aren’t they? They feel Jesus’s attention to the marginal characters to be an affront to themselves and the institutions they serve. Luke then zeroes in on three parables that Jesus tells in response. Luke, a gentile and a healer, focuses on the pure joy of the recovery, for the shepherd who finds the sheep who has strayed, for the woman who has found her lost coin, for the father whose son has returned as if from the dead. According to Luke, Jesus says (15: 7) “I tell you that ... there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

One of the tax collectors Jesus spent time with was Matthew the apostle, who is thought by many to be the gospel writer. Matthew’s chapter 18 includes the only other instance of the Lost Sheep parable and Jesus’s statement that the

shepherd “is happier about that one sheep [which is found] than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off” (18: 13). But chapter 18 also includes the central passages on church discipline, on dealing with sin by church members. I won’t go into them today, though they are worth a look. But I will quote the conclusion: If your brother or sister “refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (18: 17). I’d often found it ironic that this passage was recorded by a tax collector. But then I connected the lost sheep parables and found that the gentile Luke’s context for Jesus telling it was his meal with sinners and tax collectors. Clearly for Jesus, treating sinners as you would pagans or tax collectors does not mean shunning or banning or avoiding them. It means being among them, loving them, hoping to recover them joyfully. And then I noticed another thing about Matthew’s passages on church discipline. They are framed in Chapter 18 by the charge to “take the lowly position of a child”, by the parable of the lost sheep, by the adjuration to forgive seventy times seven, and by the parable of the unmerciful servant. Mercy and forgiveness are the atmosphere which discipline and accountability breathe. Struck by this I turned to the verses in chapter 9 where Jesus calls Matthew. And this is what I found:

9 As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. 10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” 12 On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 13 But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matt. 9: 9-13)

Jesus calls Matthew. He recovers him. Though Jesus eats in Matthew’s house, the wondrous truth is that Matthew, like the prodigal son, has been recalled into his father’s home, which he had actually never left. They abide together.

Jesus came to call sinners home. The Holy Spirit is the atmosphere of mercy and forgiveness that we all breathe—righteous and sinners. None of us can live without it. Recognizing that transforms our lives. Let us hope we allow the wind of the Spirit to make us gracious and even joyous hosts when a repentant prodigal knocks at our door.

Amen