

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid  
 The Fourth Sunday in Lent | Year C | Luke 15:1-3, 15b-32  
 St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Sinking Spring, PA  
 March 31st 2019

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? We've just heard what is perhaps Jesus' most celebrated parable. We know this parable as "The Prodigal Son" -- I was much older than I'd like to admit before I actually knew what "prodigal" meant: **excessive, reckless, wastefully extravagant**. But until I knew that, I didn't really know which of the two sons the title was about! Elsewhere: many commentators and biblical scholars call it something else -- the parable of the loving father, or the forgiving father -- perhaps because they think he's the real hero in the story, the one we should actually be talking about.

But your preferred name for this parable might just come from who you identify the most with: the younger son, if that describes something you'd like to go do? The older son, who kept his head down and worked as hard as he could only to feel unrewarded? The father, who was more forgiving than most would be able to be?

Whoever it is, the character we identify with in this famous parable might change from time to time. Maybe we're the prodigal son in our youth and the father as we age. Maybe we're the older brother when we see our younger siblings make mistakes -- maybe we're the fatted calf and we aren't given a second thought, or we don't know why we'd have to suffer for others to celebrate (not making this up). But God continues to speak to us through holy scripture -- there's never only one way or one lesson to learn from any given parable, and that might be most true with this one.

BEST TITLE?

I wonder though if the Christian community couldn't have thought of something better. Is "prodigal" really the best we can do? and is that even the most memorable thing about the younger son?

I'm not even sure what his biggest misstep was -- arrogance at wanting his father's inheritance before he was dead? wickedness for wild living? foolishness for wasting away all his money? I suppose "prodigal" does the trick, but it's interesting that that's the name that stuck, that for all of the virtue of this parable, it's taken on a name after one of the bad qualities, as if that's all anyone really cares about -- "the penitent son" certainly has a better ring to it.

What is clear, though, is that the younger son is *lost*. He certainly wouldn't have thought so at the beginning, but how often have you been lost and knew how you got there? He wanders to a neighboring country but he might as well have been on an island in the middle of the sea. It would appear that this began because he thought he knew best -- the line between confidence and foolishness is occasionally very thin, and as he left his father's estate with his inheritance in hand, he seemed to have been both confident and foolish.

WHERE ARE WE IN THE STORY -- LEAVING?

It's this point in the story that many can identify with -- the leaving of family, going off on one's own, only to realize how difficult it can be. Not necessarily with the crazy living and the squandering of seemingly vast

sums of money, but with the notion of leaving. Leaving what has been normal to us. Leaving something familiar as we come of age. And maybe even, as we delve further into the world of the parable and its depth of meaning, leaving God -- which, gasp, isn't necessarily a bad thing. If we can assume that the father in the story is a stand-in for God, you'll notice he doesn't stop his younger son. Perhaps because, like God, he has given us the personalities and capacities for choice, even when those choices may not be in our best interest.

Perhaps also because there are some lessons that must be learned the hard way. It isn't necessarily a bad thing to leave God if our experience wandering in a wilderness place brings us back to a greater dependence on God. Many saints' stories have this wilderness period -- a choice to leave, and a choice to come back. But, when it isn't as helpful is when that leaving tempts us to try to replace God in our lives with something else -- endlessly to look for meaning and substance and something entirely real and genuine in our lives only not to find it. It's something I know my generation is suffering through -- a generation which is skeptical of authority and perhaps for good reason, a generation which grew up in an increasingly secular society and sometimes only associates the Church with hypocrisy, a generation which is more educated than most and less employable than most. Many in this generation are as lost as the younger son, wandering and looking for the next place to turn.

## RETURNING HOME

I am hopeful that many make the same turn the younger son made, but with one difference. All of this wandering can sometime create a gulf in self worth, and returning to the parable, we hear something similar in the prodigal son. He is harder on himself than any of the characters actually know. His full line -- "treat me like one of your hired hands" -- doesn't even get out before the father cuts him off, and regardless, the older brother thinks he's the worst person in the world. But even in his turning back, even in that great line in the story -- that he came to himself, not just to his senses, but to himself, the self he was created to be -- he couldn't envision himself as worthy of the love of his father.

"treat me like one of your hired hands" -- "treat me as I believe I deserve to be treated"

That's how little he feels he deserves. That's the line he wants to deliver. But he never gets the chance to. The father in the story may not know his son's whole feelings, but he knows enough to welcome him back with open arms, to embrace him with a love that the son never expected.

When the son wanted the father to treat him like a slave, all the while the father was rejoicing in finding his son.

How often we do the same exact thing with God our Father?

How often do we tell God how we deserve to be treated when God is actually saying "I will treat you as *I* see fit" -- I will see you through the wonders of grace, of mercy.

How often do we think of God as the one who punishes and not as the one who forgives? How often do we believe God could not welcome us back when God is rejoicing when we turn back to him like the father in the story rejoices- "Your brother was dead and has come to life. He was lost and has been found."

As we said last week, there is always time with God. And no one is so far gone, so far lost to be out of the reach and embrace of God. So whoever you are in the story, grace abounds. Grace abounds when we are like the prodigal son, wandering and feeling far from the God who is never far from us. Grace abounds when we feel slighted or disrespected like the older son only to find that the presence of God has been close to us all along. Grace abounds when we don't need reasons to forgive but instead, like the father, welcome others in an embrace of love that we may not always understand. And grace abounds for the lost, because nothing, not even death itself, can keep us away from the love, the forgiveness, and the grace of God.