

The Parable of the Generous Father

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

INTRODUCTION

We are here today, to share one more Sunday worship service before we say goodbye to 2012. We will listen to this sermon. We will then celebrate Communion for the last time together this year. A new year, with new problems, new challenges, new joys and new blessings awaits us. As we look back on 2012, it is certain that most of us have some regrets; we blew it somewhere this past year. There may be disappointments. And as we look ahead to 2013, we have uncertainty, hope and fear that our hopes won't materialize.

Some use the New Year as a time to recommit themselves to plodding on. New promises, "New Year's resolutions," they are called. Others have broken too many such pledges to have much of a desire to make another. What are we as Christians to do with another new year?

Today, I hope to root all such reflections in the fertile soil of the Gospel. The passage we will read here in a moment is one of the most familiar stories of the New Testament. It is sometimes called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The Prodigal stands as testament that no matter how far anyone falls, the grace of God offers a sure hope of restoration. A new birth can come to anyone.

In looking to this passage in Luke 15 today, however, I don't intend to focus solely on the prodigal son. I want us to notice his older brother, and most of all. I want us to see the generosity of their Father. I believe that in this parable, this "earthly story with a heavenly meaning," we have one of the clearest and most powerful expressions of the Gospel. As we glimpse the generosity of the Father, we will see how in our own hearts lies a hidden prodigal and a lurking elder brother.

For this year and its failures, and for the New Year and its coming troubles, we need the Gospel. The Gospel gives us a sure hope of a better tomorrow, and a balm for the wounds of yesterday's disappointments. The Gospel says

we are more "wicked and flawed than [we] ever dared believe, and more loved and accepted than [we] ever dared hope at the same time." (Tim Keller) It gives us a hope for the future like nothing else.

READ Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

I. The Prodigal Son – *The Flawed Approach of Irreligion*

A. The enormity of the Prodigal's sin.

1. He wanted his share of his father's "property" or "living" (bion) – 1/3 of the estate (the firstborn is entitled to a double portion – Dt. 21:17).
2. This was normally only given after the father's death.
3. He liquidated his assets, selling the land – which was tied up with the very being of people in that day.
4. He shows no care for his father, no honor, no joy in the Father. He wants only to party with his friends, and to be the master of his own fate.
5. He squanders all his goods in "riotous living" with wild parties and extravagant purchases. Prodigal = means reckless in spending money.

B. The embarrassing leniency of the Father.

1. Such an insulting request would be rebuffed normally. The father would be expected to disown his son, rather than let his son sell 1/3 of his property and move away.
2. Yet the father acquiesces and allows the Prodigal to go his own way – all the while hoping and watching for his return.
3. Tim Keller notes: "Most of Jesus's listeners would have never seen a Middle Eastern patriarch respond like this. The father patiently endures a tremendous loss of honor as well as the pain of rejected love."

C. The entreaty of the Prodigal.

1. The prodigal son sees his friends leave him in his time of need.
2. He descends to the lowest point imaginable, feeding unclean pigs, food that he wishes he could eat.

3. He finally “comes to himself” and realizes that he is a fool. He plans a way out of his mess, by asking to become a hired hand, a craftsman on his father’s estate. It is too much for him to hope for a full reconciliation.
4. Perhaps in his plan, he reveals that he thinks he must pay back his father for wasting the money. In any case, he returns to his father hoping for a way out of the mess he’s made of himself.

D. The life-path of the Prodigal.

1. The prodigal represents a way of life for many. They choose to find self-fulfillment by abandoning restraints and living it up.
2. This way of life has no room for the Heavenly Father and especially not for his rules.
3. This is one of two basic ways to live. The way of moral conformity (the elder brother), and the way of self-discovery. This way says “I’m the only one who’s going to tell me how to live, and what is right or wrong for me. I will find true happiness by living as I want to live and being what I want to be.”

II. The Generous Father – *The Incredible Grace of the Gospel*

A. The incredible welcome of the Father.

1. The Prodigal was hoping to give his plea, but in all likelihood, he shouldn’t have expected as much. In that day he would have been considered “dead,” and cut off from the community as much as from the family. The community would expect him to be rejected and even publicly chastised.
2. Instead, the Father runs to him. This is something a respectable, middle-Eastern patriarch doesn’t do. Running involves a loss of dignity, a wanton abandon. It also shows that he was looking for his son, hoping for his return. The Father showing up first, prevented the community from ever doubting the Prodigal’s reception.
3. The Prodigal would have been expected to bring some gifts to atone for his wrong doing and try to bring honor back to his Father. Instead it is the Father who showers him with gifts. Not

just gifts but kisses. In Greek, it indicates the Father began to kiss him. He was extravagant in his show of affection.

B. The interrupted prayer.

1. The Prodigal begins his speech, asking forgiveness and hoping for the chance to work his way back into a good standing with the Father. Instead, the Father interrupts his prayer.
2. The reception back into the family, doesn’t depend upon the Prodigal’s prayer, but the Father’s generosity. The gifts bestowed make it absolutely clear that he is received back into full sonship.
 - i. The Best Robe – would be the father’s robe, a sure sign of his standing.
 - ii. The ring – would be the signet ring bearing the father’s seal, indicating his authority.
 - iii. The shoes on his feet – distinguish him as family, since servants and slaves would be barefoot.
 - iv. And the fatted calf – this is the highest honor of all, as meat of any kind in that day and age was rare.
3. Tim Keller in his book, *The Prodigal God*, has the Father saying “I’m not going to wait until you’ve paid off your debt; I’m not going to wait until you’ve duly groveled. You are not going to earn your way back into the family, I am going to simply take you back. I will cover your nakedness, poverty, and rags with the robes of my office and honor.”

C. The joyous party

1. Instead of stern rebuke, or a public punishment designed to enhance the social standing of the embarrassed Father, the patriarch throws the most lavish party. He invites all to come, so there will be no doubt as to the Father’s reception of his son. There will be much less cause for doubting his move when all are distinguished party guests.
2. This party fits in with the joy expressed on the recovery of the lost sheep and the lost coin, earlier in Luke 15. Joy and exuberance are on display. And ironically, it is the Father who knows how to throw the best party – lavishly and prodigal-y.

D. The incredible grace of God

1. The Father's reception of the Prodigal displays the beauty of God's grace in accepting sinners. He doesn't ask us to earn our place at his table. He doesn't even care about what words we choose to express our repentance with. There is food to spare in our Father's house, and he has a welcome for sinners such as us.
2. This is expressed well in the song: "When God Ran."

Almighty God, the great I am
Immovable rock, omnipotent, powerful, awesome Lord
Victorious warrior, commanding King of Kings
Mighty conqueror, and the only time
the only time I ever saw Him run

CHORUS:

Was when He ran to me, He took me in His arms
Held my head to His chest, said "My son's come home again"
Lifted my face, wiped the tears from my eyes
With forgiveness in His voice He said,
"Son do you know I still love you?"
He caught me by surprise when God ran

3. While the Prodigal was prepared to say he was "no longer worthy to be called **your son**," the Generous Father told his servants to kill the fattened calf because "**this my son** was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found."

III. The Elder Brother – *The Flawed Approach of Religion*

A. The departure of the Elder Brother.

1. The elder brother reveals himself to be just as estranged from his Father, as was his younger prodigal brother. Although he remains near the father, and dutifully obeys his Father's commands, his heart is afar off in a foreign land.
2. The elder brother does not share his father's joy, he sees the expense of the feast as a waste for an undeserving cause.

3. He laments that he never had a party in his own right for his friends (notice how he doesn't include his father). His brother wasted his living on wild parties, and the elder brother imagines such parties for himself and his friends, also at the father's expense.
4. David Gooding describes his attitude: "Generosity to a bankrupt but repentant prodigal was to him not an expression of his undeserved wealth as the heir of all the father had, but the squandering of hard-won earnings which he could not afford to give away." (Ryken, commentary, pg. 157)
5. The elder brother disowns his brother "this son of yours," and describes his life with the father as one of drudgery and service.
6. The actions of the elder brother are a social snub to his father in their own right. Instead of being at his father's side at the feast, he makes the father come groveling to him outside. In our culture, this is sort of like a son starting a shouting match with his father at a wedding reception for his sister.
7. Additionally, the elder brother revealed he may not have been so pure after all. He imagines his brother wasting his money on prostitutes. Could this be what he secretly wished to do himself, and would have if he could? How would he know what the younger brother did with his money? The elder brother wanted a party and a life of sin as badly as the younger brother. He just didn't allow himself to indulge in that vice. Instead he cherished a secret longing for sin even as he was proud in his moral accomplishments.

B. The entreaty of the Father.

1. Again, we could imagine the Father would have just ignored the insolence of the elder brother. Or he may have dealt harshly with him. Instead, he lovingly points out the error of his son's ways and holds out hope for restoration.
2. He points out that the elder brother is with him – shouldn't this fellowship and love relationship be key? And all the father has is his son's – he is the heir. In fact, the friends and the brother should be able to party with his wayward brother – they could

find joy in that and in each other's company at the same time.
This feast could be his too.

C. The life-path of the elder brother

1. The elder brother represents a way of life for many. They choose to find fulfillment by way of moral discipline and religious observance.
2. This is another of two basic ways to live. In contrast to the prodigal's way of self-discovery, the way of moral conformity says "I'm not going to do what I want, but what tradition and the community – or what religion, wants me to do."
3. Ironically, this way also has no room for a relationship with the Father. Instead, God is someone to be controlled and to keep distance from, in the hope of earning some blessing by means of hard work and discipline.
4. Tim Keller puts it this way: "Elder brothers obey God to get things. They don't obey God to get God himself... Sin is not just breaking the rules, it is putting yourself in the place of God as Savior, Lord, and Judge just as each son sought to displace the authority of the father in his own life." "If, like the elder brother, you believe that God ought to bless you and help you because you have worked so hard to obey him and be a good person, then Jesus may be your helper, your example, even your inspiration, but he is not your Savior. You are serving as your own Savior."
- 5.

CONCLUSION

It is not just prodigal sons who need forgiveness, elder brothers do too. The Father is merciful and generous with both. He goes out to find the prodigal, and he goes out to entreat the elder brother. In the setting of the parable, the tax collectors and sinners are analogous to the younger brother, and the Pharisees and scribes, who are expressing dismay that Jesus would eat with sinners (like the Father in this story did), stand for the elder brother. But the story is open ended. Will the elder brother also repent, and return to the

Father's joyful feast? Will he rejoice in the conversion of his brother? There is still hope for the Pharisees who hear this story from Jesus' lips.

Jesus is the true elder brother in the story. He went out into the world to seek or find the lost – and save them. He was concerned enough for his Father's honor to go out and woo the prodigals home. We should rejoice in God's generous love of sinners, and trust in that love for us in such a way as to share in his mission to seek and save the lost.

We would do well to recognize that in our hearts lie a secret prodigal and a lurking elder brother attitude. Even if we have understood the love of the Father, and truly repented of our sins, we still can fall into the error of a backslidden fondness of sin, or a prideful and legalistic trusting in our own righteousness as a path for fulfillment. We are hopelessly lost and need again and again to admit this and submit to the joyful embrace of our teary-eyed Father. Oh what love and grace he shows to underserving sinners!

We can close by seeing how glorious is the reconciliation that God gives us in Christ.

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:19-21)

May we grow in our understanding of the Gospel this year. And may the Generosity of our Heavenly Father free us to live holy lives out of joyful gratitude to Him. And may we recognize anew our standing as accepted children of God and joint-heirs and brothers of Jesus Christ our Lord. (Heb. 2:11)