

Lent 4 C Sermon
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
March 27, 2022

Party Time!
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’

²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his

slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’

³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

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Picture it: Jesus had just set down to dinner. It was a simple meal, but he was sharing it with others and that made it special. The others were outcasts—tax collectors and sinners—and the morally upright religious folks didn’t like it, not one bit. In response Jesus told them a parable. Now, the power of a good parable rests in its relatability. The parable of the Prodigal Son is arguably Jesus’ best parable—it’s certainly his most famous—and I think that’s in large part due to the fact that all of us can find ourselves in it.

Perhaps you relate with the younger son, the prodigal son. You

know what it's like to grow up in the shadow of an older, seemingly perfect, sibling. They dutifully listen to your parents, do exactly what they're told, make the grades, excel at extra-curricular activities, settle into the perfect job with the perfect family. It's about enough to make you sick! You just want to get out from under their shadow, discover the world, live your life and make your own way, but your folks are constantly comparing you with your perfect predecessor and you can't measure up.

Perhaps you relate to the older son—the “principled” son. Unlike your younger siblings, you had to make all the mistakes, blaze the trail for the younger ones to follow. You had to live up to the incredibly high demands of your parents and suffocate under the weight of their expectations. You were the first to go to school, the first to graduate, the first to get a job, the first to start a family. You are the eldest so the responsibility of the family business fell to you, the responsibility of caring for the parents fell to you, and you're tired of the younger ones not pulling their share of the weight. After all, your folks were easier on them, their expectations tempered by their experiences of watching you grow up. It would be nice for them to shoulder some of the burden, take some of the responsibility, but they're too busy following their own pipe dreams to be concerned by the responsibilities that you carry.

Perhaps you relate to the father. You know what it's like to work hard all your life, to pass on the fruits of your labors to your children. You love them unconditionally and it causes you pain every time you see them make a mistake that you could've helped them avoid. You've done your best to raise them to be responsible and to look out for one another, but they can't seem to get along and they resent you for trying to bring them all to the table for holiday meals and special celebrations. You're tired, but your heart is bursting with love for them and no matter what, you'll never give up, never stop trying, never stop loving.

The power of a good parable rests in its relatability, and this is a relatable parable. A good parable is relatable so that its hearers can find themselves in the story and be more open to the lesson that it seeks to communicate. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is full of lessons and it would take many volumes to hold the interpretations of centuries of commentators, preachers, and theologians. Today, though, I'm interested in what it has to say to us—to the church, New England Church in particular.

Here's what I see: most people, like the sons in this story, get grouped, justly or otherwise, into one of two categories: the principled and the prodigal. The church is called to be like a parent, loving them both and bringing them inside to share in the party. The truth of the matter is, though, in its 2000 years of history, the church, and society as a whole, has always been better at welcoming the *principled* children than the prodigals.

In fact, Tertullian, an early defender of the faith, insisted that the Parable of the Prodigal Son must never apply to Christians. If it did, he said, then not only “adulterers and fornicators” but also “idolaters, blasphemers, and renegades” would use the parable to pardon their sin. “Who will worry about losing what can so easily be regained?” he asked. And others agreed with him.

Novatian, a near contemporary of Tertullian, allowed that while God certainly had the power to forgive...the church should not—indeed, could not...without a long and public period of humiliation. If the church really was Christ's body, Novatian reasoned, then it was supposed to be without sin. To welcome a tainted person back into fellowship was to defile the whole body. They might as well put a little hepatitis B in the communion cup the next Sunday as do something like that.¹

The church has been quick to ignore Jesus' teaching in the Parable

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor. “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” Prodigalsall.com, <http://www.prodigalsall.com/barbara-brown-taylor.html>.

of the Prodigal Son on account of the perceived sins that people commit. It's been quick to label people heretics, outsiders, prodigals for any number of reasons—for their actions, but also for their thoughts: math, science, philosophy, reason, and religion that in some way contradict a rigid interpretation of the biblical faith.

And not just for what is done or thought, the church has even condemned people as prodigals for who they are—simple, unchangeable facts of birth that somehow separate the perceived prodigals from the principled ones.

But the father in Jesus' story doesn't really seem to care why his son is labeled a prodigal. Whether it was due to physical sin, wrong thought, or simply by chance of birth; his primary focus is on reuniting his family. Two sons. One invitation. The same party.

As we consider our calling to be the church in the 21st century, here on the corner of West Galena and Chestnut in Aurora, IL, who are the children—the prodigals—we are being called to welcome into the party?

Jesus' story ends with the elder brother standing outside the house in the yard with his father, listening to the party going on inside. Jesus leaves it that way, I think, because it is up to us, to our churches, to this church to finish the story. May we, like the father, with arms wide open and a heart breaking with love say: "Prodigals and Principled children alike are welcome at the party and ALL are welcome in this place." Amen.