



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“The Prodigal God”

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The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

Luke 15,11-32

“Feeling footloose and frisky, a featherbrained fellow forced his father to fork over his farthings. Fast he flew to foreign fields and frittered his family's fortune, feasting fabulously with floozies and faithless friends. Flooded with flattery he financed a full-fledged fling of "funny foam" and fast food.

Fleeced by his fellows in folly, facing famine, and feeling faintly fuzzy, he found himself a feed-flinger in a filthy foreign farmyard. Feeling frail and fairly famished, he fain would have filled his frame with foraged food from the fodder fragments. ‘Fooy,’ he figured, ‘my father's flunkies fare far fancier,’ the frazzled fugitive fumed feverishly, facing the facts. Finally, frustrated from failure and filled with foreboding (but following his feelings) he fled from the filthy foreign farmyard.

Faraway, the father focused on the fretful familiar form in the field and flew to him and fondly flung his forearms around the fatigued fugitive. Falling at his father's feet, the fugitive floundered forlornly, ‘Father, I have flunked and fruitlessly forfeited family favor.’ Finally, the faithful Father, forbidding and forestalling further flinching, frantically flagged the flunkies to fetch forth the finest fatling and fix a feast.

Faithfully, the father's first-born was in a fertile field fixing fences while father and fugitive were feeling festive. The foreman felt fantastic as he flashed the fortunate news of a familiar family face that had forsaken fatal foolishness. Forty-four feet from the farmhouse the first-born found a farmhand fixing a fatling. Frowning and finding fault, he found father and fumed, ‘Floozies and foam from frittered family funds and you fix a feast following the fugitive's folderol?’ The first-born's fury flashed, but fussing was futile. The frugal first-born felt it was fitting to feel "favored" for his faithfulness and fidelity to family, father, and farm. In foolhardy fashion, he faulted the father for failing to furnish a fatling and feast for his friends. His folly was not in feeling fit for feast and fatling for friends; rather his flaw was in his feeling about the fairness of the festival for the found fugitive. His fundamental fallacy was a fixation on favoritism, not forgiveness. Any focus on feeling ‘favored’ will fester and friction will force the faded facade to fall.

Frankly, the father felt the frigid first-born's frugality of forgiveness was formidable and frightful. But the father's former faithful fortitude and fearless forbearance to forgive both fugitive and first-born flourishes. The farsighted father figured, ‘Such fidelity is fine, but what forbids fervent festivity for the fugitive that is found? Unfurl the flags and finery, let fun and frolic freely flow. Former failure is forgotten, folly is forsaken. Forgiveness forms the foundation for future fortune.’”

That fun formulation of this famous parable of Jesus is called *The Prodigal in F* and was written by Timothy E. Fulop of Columbia Theological Seminary. It's not only fun but a helpful retelling of Jesus famous, but ill-named, parable that is widely known and well loved. I say ill-named because it is not the younger son's prodigious waste of money that should be the focus of the story but rather the father's prodigious love towards both his sons. Of course, Jesus didn't give titles to any of his parables; the church did so over centuries of retelling. And we might well ask why this parable got misnamed 'the prodigal son.' When it is so clear that the Father in the story is representative of God's astonishing love towards all his children, why did this story get a title having to do with one of the sons – the wild one, the bad boy?

Part of the reason comes from our failure to theologize first and moralize second, a sound pattern for biblical interpretation I mentioned two weeks ago. When we come to a story like this, we need first to inquire where God is in the story. And here, as I said, the father represents God. But it's hard to hold onto that truth in this great story for two reasons. The first is that the story has such a familiar ring to us. Most of us ran away or at least contemplated doing so as children. Most of us – whether we think ourselves the good kid or the bad in the family – know something about sibling rivalry. And most of us have discovered – some sooner, some later – that life is not fair. And so, quite naturally, our attention turns first to the sons. We seek to figure out which one we are most like and then to check out how the father relates to that child.

It might almost better if this story began 'there was a man who had two sons, and he lost both of them.' For surely, the bad boy is lost to wine, women and song – at least so his prudish elder brother speculates based on who knows what information, perhaps nothing more than what he himself would pursue if he had indulged his appetites freely. And the good boy, the elder brother, is lost to self-righteousness, that lonely place founded on the belief that the world would be a perfect place if everyone lived as morally, filled familial obligations, and worked as hard as I do. Younger sons, from that day to this, know the joy of being forgiven when their excesses lead to the place of despair where wisdom is sometimes born. And elder brothers, from that day to this, resent other people not getting the punishment they deserve and have to decide if they will come to a party thrown by a seemingly foolish and gullible father. It is understandable that our attention gets focused on the children in this story because that's our story.

But the other reason we focus on the kids is that to focus on the father is to meet a God so unlike our expectations that we're not sure what to make of such a god. Aristotle said, "Great men never run in public" and Jewish tradition in the first century would certainly have agreed. This father's behavior is undignified, unseemly. The very idea that God would come rushing towards us, arms open, robes flapping, eager to embrace us and forgive is almost beyond imagination. Why, it's as unthinkable as God being the unclean shepherd who keeps searching for a lost sheep or the never-good-enough-to-be-righteous woman who keeps searching for a lost coin. Whatever happened to the stern, disapproving, must-be-appeased, judge of a god? Whatever happened to the he-who-must-be-obeyed-father figure god we think, in our hubris, we can manage? Says Jesus, the God I am come to reveal is like this seeing, running, forgiving, blessing Father. And that's a lot for us to handle.

But, my beloved in Christ, that is the precisely the God we meet in Jesus. And thanks be to God it is so. This God runs to welcome the wayward penitent and also goes out to the barn to beseech the righteous impenitent brother's presence at the party that will not be complete without him. A coming toward us God. That's really what grace is – the God of love and mercy moving towards us, not as we do or don't deserve, but as God intends. Sparky Anderson was a great manager of the Detroit Tigers back in the day, and he had at least one moment of spot on theological insight when he said, "Grace is getting what you don't deserve, and mercy is not getting what you do deserve." And the gracious, merciful God is what Jesus is portraying in the father in this marvelous story. It is God who is prodigal - prodigal in love, mercy, forgiveness and grace.

Henri Nouwen was one of the great spiritual leaders and writers of the last century. And following Nouwen's study of this parable, I want to turn the way we think about it. Nouwen suggests that rather than spend our energy trying to figure out if we identify most closely with either the younger brother or the older, it is more helpful for us to see these as developmental stages in our life journeys. There is a season of life when we do need to spread our wings, to leave the traditions of our parents, to take chances and try to find not only our own way, but our own identity. And as we do that, we will usually do some things right, and sometimes we will crash and burn. The crucial work in this season of life is that we come to the beginning of wisdom. Mark Twain said that when he was fourteen, he could not believe how stupid his father was, but that when he was twenty-one, he was astonished how much the old man had learned in seven years. That's the younger son, the one who woke up starving in a pig pen – a horrible fate for a Jew – in order to begin to come to a measure of wisdom. There he discovered that he had been foolish and hurtful towards his father. There he began the journey of seeking forgiveness that leads to reconciliation.

And says Nouwen, there is a season of life where it is right that we take our place as responsible people, working hard, following the rules, filling obligations and all the rest. It's not the behavior of elder brothers that is problematic. Indeed the world would be in an even a worse mess without folks who get up every day, go to work, pay taxes, vote, volunteer, raise kids, care for aging parents and all the rest. The problem is not with the behavior, but with our attitude towards it. Get stuck for too long in this season of life, and it is almost impossible not to become self-righteous and self-congratulatory, resentful of free spirit siblings, older parents and anyone else seen as not pulling their weight.

And so, Nouwen concludes that this wonderful parable is calling us to mature into the third character in the story, the blessing father. There comes a season when we can smile at our youthful indiscretions without beating ourselves up about them. There comes a season when we can be appropriately proud of our accomplishments without thinking we've thereby earned God's favor. And in that ripening, maturing season, we are called to a new work – that of becoming the blessing parent, the one who is willing to share what he or she has to bless others; who gives up judging others, and all the distancing, that produces for the sake of relationship; who is no longer asking 'how do I make sure I get mine?' but rather "who am I called to bless?"

The problem is that too often we don't grasp our calling to make that last step in our faith journeys. We get bogged down in all the sibling rivalry stuff - and not just in our families but culture wide where liberals think conservatives are just too uptight and conservatives are certain liberals are just

too loosey goosey – and miss our calling to mature past all that into a faith that is, like our God, ever seeking to bless.

We have a lot of mature people in our congregation. We now have a wonderful Mature Ministries program that seeks both to meet the needs and to call forth the gifts of our older adults. At the same time, we know the average age of the congregation has been rising in recent years, and that our most common hair color is a remarkably beautiful array of shades of gray going towards white. And so, I wonder if Henri Nouwen’s take on this parable isn’t particularly germane to us. We are a congregation blessed with so many older fathers and mothers who can bless those coming after them. And blessing is what we all need and long for. Our world is full of the harsh words of cursing others as wrong or corrupt or immoral or stupid. It is a world much shaped by the sense of entitlement where we led to believe all are wants are justified and should be met right not, and by the not often spoken, but ever present question, “what’s in it for me?” This parable would suggest those are not new realities among which to live. But it also says that into such a world our God is ever coming seeking not only to bless, but to enroll us in the community of blessing.

And maybe, just maybe, we can be among those who move beyond the younger son-older brother wars to sign on with this surprising, blessing God to see what God might do through our blessing of others. I do hope so.

Amen +

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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