

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
March 14, 2010
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

“Lost Son, Prodigal Father, Prodigal God”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent and yet I am thinking about Advent. I am thinking about how Advent is often called “a little Lent” as we wait for the coming of the Christ child—we wait while the nights grow longer, the days grow shorter, and darkness settles in around us like a thick quilt. During that growing darkness, we try to keep our spirits up but the darkness wears on us. In Church, we light the Advent wreath faithfully bringing light into our Sanctuary. We light a deep purple candle on week one and on week two and then on week three we light a PINK candle.....because those Christians who created the Advent Wreath knew that by week three people need a brightly colored candle to brighten our spirits.

We are now moving through the somber and soul-searching forty days of Lent...we gathered for a serious Ash Wednesday Service and left with black crosses on our foreheads. We have been talking about working hard at deepening our spiritual practices during Lent; we have been talking about Jesus as mother hen fighting that fox Herod with the only things he had: his words and his body. And we have been talking about Jesus saying “repent or perish”—we thought about what those surprising words coming out of Jesus’ mouth might have meant then and what they mean for us today. We are definitely well into Lent.

Amidst the heaviness, the preparation, and the almost dread that develops before Holy Week, the Lectionary gives us today’s joy-filled reading—like the pink candle in the Advent Wreath—a joy-filled reading just when we need it. Here we are knee-deep in Lenten readings, Lenten repentance, Lenten preparation and we are given the story of the Prodigal Son—a story that is about love, humility, acceptance, forgiveness, and ends with an enormous welcome home party.

I love this parable but I think that the scholars who have named it the catchy “Prodigal Son” story have given it the wrong title.

The son is lost and troubled, the story is really about a Prodigal father who symbolizes a Prodigal God. Remember: prodigal means extravagant, wasteful. The son is indulgent, exploitive and careless, the father (code for God) is extravagant in his love and forgiveness. The term “love wastefully,” used so often by Bishop John Shelby Spong, comes to mind. The father is the real Prodigal figure—the father running with open arms to meet his wayward son.

Jesus, the king of reversals, recounts this parable. Jesus with whom up is down and poor is rich tells this poignant and powerful story. Jesus famous for turning conventional wisdom, established customs and accepted practices on their heads with such surprising statements and reversals such as “pray for those who persecute you,” and “the meek shall inherit the earth,” and “you must become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven,” tells this parable filled with nuance. In this story there are meanings behind meanings. Jesus’ parable is complex and multi-layered and he must have intended that.

The parable is shocking right from the start.

*There was a man who had two sons. The 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.*

No one in this story acts as would be expected, no one behaves in ways that are consistent with accepted practices and customs of ancient Israel. The younger son is asking for his inheritance while his father is still living—that is essentially, according to ancient custom, wishing his father dead. It is both disrespectful and unacceptable. It reminds me of the story of Prince Charles talking to a group of journalists years ago. The reporters were pressing Prince Charles to talk about his ascending to the throne of England. Prince Charles stopped the conversation and said to the journalists, “Gentlemen, you are speaking of the death of my mother.”

The younger son in Jesus’ parable exhibits no such sense of respect or even affection for his father. He asks for his inheritance while his father is still alive. This is insulting to the father. The younger son’s actions and attitude would have been an offense to the values of the time and the standards of the village. But the next surprising turn of events in the story is that the father complies! The accepted convention would be for the father to explode in anger in response to his son’s unreasonable request. But the father agrees to divide up his wealth.

Giving away his wealth while still living could endanger the father’s own security in the future, but surprise surprise he complies and divides up his estate as the

custom dictated which is 2/3 to the older son and 1/3 to his other heirs, we assume 1/3 is given to the younger son.

The story is full of reversals, surprises and behaviors that run counter to the established norms of the time....the son is brash and callous and the father responds with kindness and generosity.

The son wants to enjoy the good life NOW and not wait for the future; the father risks his own future by giving away his wealth while he is still living.

The intrigue continues. The younger son takes his new-found riches and travels to a far-away country—presumably a Gentile country—where he enjoys his freedom, squanders his inheritance, and lives a wild life. When he has gone through all his wealth and is flat broke, the son hires himself out to a Gentile pig farmer to be a farm hand, which is about as unJewish as possible! Remember: pigs were an abomination to Jews (see Leviticus 11:7 and Deuteronomy 14:8) and people who cared for swine were cursed. The son's job is to feed the pigs and he is so destitute and hungry that the story says, *“He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating... no one gave him anything.”*

The pods in the story are from carob trees—they were fed to animals. In times of great desperation, these pods were sometimes eaten by very poor people. Jesus is making the point that his young man is a profoundly lost soul and totally destitute. In ancient times he would have been considered a terrible sinner.

But while tending the pigs, the young man has a revelation! He decides to go home. He is a hired hand on a pig farm and he earns nothing. He must have thought to himself: I can go home and at least be hired on to the family business and get what the other servants receive—which is better than pig food. The son's conversion experience seems to be more stomach-driven than heart-felt. He is hungry, broke and alone. And in that state this lost and wayward son goes home.

Then the story becomes deeply touching. The Bible says the father runs to meet the son. Listen, *“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.”* Again there is important symbolism behind those simple words. It was the custom in ancient Israel that any Jew who traveled to another country and lost his wealth there would face the Kezazah (which literally means “the cutting off”). The Kezazah was performed by breaking a clay pot at the feet of the person who returned as a symbol that the community has rejected that person forever.

But the wayward son is not greeted with the Kezazah, the ritual of rejection. The son is not greeted with rejection at all. Instead the father RUNS to meet the son, and the meaning of that gesture is important. The father knows that the son will be humiliated by the taunts of the villagers as the son returns because of his past conduct and so to spare his son that humiliation, the father humiliates himself and runs to greet his son. In ancient times, it was considered humiliating for men over forty to run anywhere. AND in order to RUN, the father would have had to lift his robe—another humiliation. But as Jesus tells the story, the father RUNS to the son. Jesus intentionally uses the word RUN. And the father embraces and kisses the son in public which are powerful signs of reconciliation.

Here we might picture Rembrandt's beautiful painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son* with the son kneeling at the feet of his father—and the father's face reflecting deep love, forgiveness and relief.

In a first-century context, Jesus' followers might have thought that the biggest failure in the family was the father for running to meet his son, reconciling with the son in public, forgiving him so fully and then throwing him an extravagant welcome home party. The son does say some words of regret, "*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*" Short and sweet and we want to believe heartfelt. The father responds by telling his servants to bring out a robe for his son, and not just any robe but the best robe, to be put on his son, and a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. AND the father tells his servants to kill the fatted calf and let everyone eat and celebrate, "for this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found!"

What matters in this story is that the son is home—the father has received his son back. The relationship of the father and son is restored purely by the grace of the father, not the bargaining or apology of the son. The gifts the father gives the son are signs of a restored relationship—the "best robe" means it was the father's robe. The father puts his son in his own finest robe. The signet ring was a sign of restored authority and responsibility. The shoes are a sign that the son is indeed a son NOT a servant. The killing of the fatted calf was a sign that the whole community was invited to celebrate the restoration of the relationship. The father exhibits an unexpected, extravagant display of grace—he restores his son fully to an honored place in the family and in the community. "Let us eat and celebrate," he says, "for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The reversals, the hidden meanings, the nuances, and the surprising behaviors in this story all point to one theme, one message: we are the son, wayward and lost; God is the parent, loving and forgiving. And God loves a party that celebrates the restoration of life to the dead and the renewal of a relationship with the lost. There will be no punishment, no vengeance, no repayment, no keeping score—there will only be joy and celebration when the lost are found and those who have been dead to us are alive once again. **The message is: disgrace can be transformed, sin can be forgiven, and love can heal.** God is the gracious parent who will part with riches when asked, grieve for a lost boy, and RUN to meet that child when he returns to the village.

Theologian Rodney Clapp writes about the abundance in the prodigal son story: “Every time God’s active, stretching, searching, healing love finds someone and calls that person back home, it does not mean there is less for the rest of us. It means there is more. More wine. More feasting. More music. More dancing. It means another, and now a bigger, party.”

The prodigal son story, which I think should be called the lost son story, is about a prodigal father, a prodigal God who is extravagant and wasteful in loving. The generosity of the father’s, or God’s love transforms life....for the son, for the villagers, who those who witness his expansive forgiveness and affection. The father in the story is willing to reach beyond propriety to limitless self-giving. And so he creates a celebration that is restorative, healing, and life-giving.

Lent is a good time to be reminded that WE may feel like long-lost sons and daughters and yet we can bring our failures to God, to Jesus, to the cross and leave them there. A loving God whose arms are wide open is running toward us to meet us, forgive us and love us despite our failings—a loving God whose message to us is: your failings are not final or fatal.

Come home. I will welcome you with love and shower you with grace.

In his best-selling book *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey tells the story of a conference on comparative religions held in Britain several decades ago. A group of theologians and religious intellectuals were discussing whether any single belief was totally unique to Christianity. Different possibilities were put forward. Perhaps the Incarnation? No, other religions, including Greek and Roman mythology, had stories of gods becoming human in form. Resurrection? No, other religions also had stories of people returning from the dead. The debate continued for some time, when writer C.S. Lewis came into the room.

“What’s the commotion about?” he asked. They told him they were discussing what Christianity’s unique contribution might be among world religions. Almost immediately, Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.” After some discussion, the conferees had to agree. The concept that God’s love comes to us free of charge, with no strings attached, defies human logic. The Buddhists have an eightfold path to enlightenment, the Hindus have the concept of Karma, the Jews seek to adhere to the Torah and the Muslims have their code of law from the Koran. Each religion has its own way for people to earn divine approval. Only Christianity dares to declare God’s love UNCONDITIONAL, and that is called grace.

Jesus tells the story of a loving father, representing God, RUNNING with his robe hiked up so he CAN run, out to meet his exploitive, wayward son who has insulted him and squandered his wealth. And the father runs to meet him. That is love. Forgiveness. And Grace. Pure and simple.

Remember now the words to that beloved old hymn we sang earlier...

*Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down;
fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown;
Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart.*

*Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit into every troubled breast;
let us all in thee inherit, let us find thy promised rest;
take away our love of sinning; alpha and omega be;
end of faith, as its beginning, set our hearts at liberty.*

May you continue to have a Holy Lent.
Welcome Home.
Amen.