

First Presbyterian Church, Wausau

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

A Father and Two Sons – March 6, 2016

Today's New Testament lesson is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. You probably know it as the parable of the Prodigal Son, a tale about God's extravagant grace. It's right up there with the story of the Good Samaritan. So recognizable that as soon as we hear those opening words "There was a man who had two sons..." we immediately call to mind an ungrateful wretch of a son who runs off, squanders his inheritance, comes crawling home to Daddy and is surprisingly received with wide open arms. Such is the unconditional love of God for us sinners.

The shock value of this story has long worn off. We know it too well. Professor Tom Long has said, "The story has all the bland predictability of a biblical theme park." (*Surprise Party*, from *The Christian Century*, 03/14/01) So the task for us today is to try to hear this story with fresh ears and approach it with an openness to receiving new insight from such a beloved story. Sometimes something we thought we knew backwards and forwards can surprise us with something new.

This parable is the third of three that Jesus shared with some Pharisees and scribes who were taking issue with his choice of companions. Luke told us that some tax collectors and sinners had drawn near to Jesus to hear what he had to say. The religious leaders who were nearby grumbled about this. They said scornfully, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." This is one of those statements that gets lost on us.

As good Presbyterians and followers of John Calvin, we have little problem acknowledging that all people are sinners. But here we miss the point, we miss the scandal. To a Jew, sinners could fall under five basic categories: people who did dirty things for a living, people who committed immoral acts, people who did not live according to high righteous standards, Samaritans, and Gentiles. No law-abiding Jew would associate with them, let alone, eat with them, as Jesus was in the habit of doing.

Consider this. Imagine Jesus walking into a local supper club for Friday Night Fish Fry. Sitting at table with him would be a drug dealer, a pimp, a few prostitutes, a child molester, an AIDS patient, some homeless folks, a teenage heroin addict, an abortion doctor, an arms dealer, an ex con, a woman on welfare with her five children by three different fathers, a person with schizophrenia, a few undocumented people from Mexico, and the guy who owes the town junkyard. (*Table Manners*, Barbara Brown Taylor, *Christian Century*, 03/11/99)

And Jesus is smiling and laughing with these folks when in walks the Bible Fellowship Group from a local congregation. They sit together, holding hands and bowing their heads to say grace. All is well, until one of the church folks practically chokes on her baked walleye when she sees who Jesus is entertaining. They're shocked by what they are witnessing. Jesus eating with sinners.

The Pharisees can't get that image out of their heads, of Jesus associating with sinners and tax collectors – welcoming them to the table. And the old adage slowly comes to mind – "birds of a

feather flock together.” And it is in this context that Jesus tells his three parables. The one we know as the Prodigal Son is the final one he tells.

That particular title for the parable is rather unfortunate, because it puts undue emphasis on only one of the characters when in fact, there are actually three. Jesus begins the parable by saying, “There was a man who had two sons.” A father, a younger son, and an older son. And then there’s that word prodigal – not one that I use on a daily basis – it means wasteful or reckless or extravagant. In some ways that better fits the father in this story, because he is certainly extravagant in his love, and, as seen through the eyes of the older brother – the father seems reckless and wasteful in how he welcomes home the younger son.

The two parables Jesus teaches prior to this one tell of items that had been lost but then became found. In the first he tells of a lost sheep and in the second, a lost coin. In both cases the items were found, and their discovery was followed by much rejoicing. In a similar way, this parable is a story about lost sons. Not just one, but two sons, who have lost their way. Two sons in desperate need of being found.

The lostness of the younger son is more obvious. He wants his share of the inheritance. In effect, he is saying to his father, “Dad, I don’t want to wait until you keel over sometime in the future, I want my portion now.” And the father acquiesced. The younger son headed for a far off land – meaning Gentile territory – and squandered his inheritance in self-indulgent and immoral living.

About the same time he ran out of his cash, a famine hit the region, and the younger son found himself in quite a predicament – alone and destitute. He found a job with a gentile farmer who put him to work slopping the pigs. Now obviously, he hadn’t been the most righteous of young men, but any Jew would have cringed at the thought of coming near to a pig. And so there he was, not only wallowing with them, but longing to eat the very food he tossed to them. The reality of his situation overwhelmed him, and, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, all he could think of was home.

This wasn’t some sort of “come to Jesus” moment, where suddenly he repented of all the sins of his life. Instead, it was a smack in the face by the real world. He saw the stupidity of what he had done, and he didn’t know where else to turn. His thoughts turned to home, to what was familiar to him. He knew that the hirelings back at his father’s estate ate better than these pigs. He made the decision to go back home and admit his wrongdoing to his father. He didn’t even consider being reinstated as a son, but would simply ask for a job on the farm. And so he began the long walk home.

The father was heartbroken. No matter what horrible thing the boy could think of to do, he would still always be his beloved son. Nothing could change a parent’s love for his child. He fretted and worried. Some nights he tossed and turned in his bed, wondering where was his child? Was he safe from harm? Each day his eyes scanned the horizon, hoping against hope that one day his son would come home.

And when that day finally arrived, he could scarcely believe it. There in the distance a figure was approaching. His frame was gaunt, his pace was slow, but the father knew. His son had been found. The old man leapt from his seat and began hurrying toward his son. Grabbing his robes up so he

wouldn't trip, his bare legs exposed for all to see, he didn't care how foolish he looked. No self-respecting man would be caught dead making such a public spectacle. But that didn't matter now. His prayers had been answered.

As he made his way down the familiar path, the younger son was astonished to see his father rushing toward him. For a split second he imagined that the old man was out for blood, but then he saw his father's eyes, overflowing with tears of compassion. Before the boy could blurt out his well-rehearsed confession, his father had embraced him and kissed his head.

The boy's words fell upon deaf ears as the overjoyed old man told his servants to prepare an impromptu party. "Let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost, but now he is found!" Caught up in the enthusiasm, they all began to celebrate.

Later in the day, the older son, who had been out in the field working approached the house. Hearing the sounds of music and laughter, he asked a servant the reason for the celebration. When he heard the news, he was flooded with resentment. This ungrateful scoundrel who treated their father with such disrespect to be honored in such a way?

No, he wasn't surprised that the spoiled brat had finally come home. That was to be expected. The youth was too careless for the money to have lasted for very long. But he should have come home crawling, begging for forgiveness, made to feel guilty for the sins he had committed. Let him sleep out in the barn. Why should he be rewarded for his sinful living? Angry, the older son refused to be a part of the celebration. Later his father came to him, pleading with him to come inside and see his brother and share in the feast. But the older son refused to be in the same room with that rascal, let alone sit at table with him.

The older son could not even claim a relationship to his brother. He referred to him as "your son" as he ranted at his father. "I am the dutiful hard worker around here. I have been busting my behind like a slave for you for all these years. I have never gone against you, never disobeyed you, always followed what you wanted me to do. Yet you never held a party in my honor, never gave me a choice goat to barbeque for my friends! And when this son of yours comes waltzing home after dishonoring your property by wasting it on prostitutes, you prepare a feast!"

Remember when I said earlier that both sons were lost? The lostness of the older son isn't quite so obvious. He became lost without ever leaving home. He is caught up in doing the right thing. He wants to earn his father's favor, not receive that favor graciously. He does everything by the book, following the letter of the law. He does it out of duty and uninspired obedience, not out of love. He never even dreamed of asking his father for a party to celebrate with his friends, because he can only judge the world by his strict standards of right and wrong. His actions are calculated and cold. Relationship means nothing to him, because he doesn't understand it. He's probably always been envious of his carefree younger brother and resentful of his father for his willingness to give in to the younger son's demands. And now he is bitter by his father's extravagant and even foolish generosity toward someone who in his eyes doesn't deserve it.

Henri Nouwen, an author well known for his books on Christian Spirituality, wrote this about the position of the older brother:

All of this became very real for me when a friend who had recently become a Christian criticized me for not being very prayerful. His criticism made me very angry. I said to myself, "How dare he teach me a lesson about prayer! For years he lived a carefree and undisciplined life, while since childhood I have scrupulously lived the life of faith. Now he is converted and starts telling me how to behave!" This inner resentment reveals to me my own lostness. I had stayed home and did not wander off, but had not yet lived a free life in my father's house. (*The Return of the Prodigal Son*, p. 70)

As with the younger son, the father comes out to the older son, to greet him and offer him a way back home. He invites him to come inside, to join the festivities, to become part of the celebration. As scholar Tom Walker states, "The father tries to help him see the world through a different interpretive lens." Though life for the older brother has seemed an unrewarded drudgery, the father reminds him they've been together daily and points out how joyous that is. Though the older brother is offended by the extravagance of the party, his father reminds him that what belongs to him also belongs to the older son. The father ends with an invitation to rejoice over the new life – what was lost is now found. (*Luke – Interpretation Bible Studies*, p. 81)

There are times in our lives when we can relate to the lostness of both of the sons. But for many of us, the lostness of the older brother seems to hit closer to home than the wanton living of the younger son. We're more like the Pharisees and scribes who scoff at Jesus' choice of table companions.

The extravagance of God's grace offends us in its overwhelming acceptance of the lost. Sure, let the penitent come home – in a proper attitude of repentance and guilt – not with feasting and dancing. Let them take their proper place, not the place of honor at the banquet table. They don't deserve it.

The father invites the older son to come in and sit at that banquet table with his younger brother. He invites him to reclaim the relationship that has been lost and to join the celebration. To see that the one whom he considered to be enemy is actually brother.

Luke leaves the story open-ended. We don't know what the older brother chooses to do. It is up to us to answer that question for ourselves.