

## REFLECTIONS ON THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL

a sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Tom Collins

Santee (SC) Presbyterian Church

October 13, 2013

Psalm 68:1-6 Luke 15:11-32

We all have a favorite passage in the Bible. Mine is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Some stories, vignettes, and parables are repeated in the New Testament, but this parable can be found only in Luke 15.

It is both rich and beautiful. Beautiful because it captures the essence of human life and how the gospel responds to it. Rich because no matter how many times I read it, it always tends to give me something new. It is a deep and rich vein to mine.

It was tagged with a title (The Parable of the Prodigal Son) by St. Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, a title it has never been able to shake. He called it in Latin the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and it is probably the only time you and I use the word “prodigal” which simply means wasteful. Modern theologians and biblical commentators have mildly contested this title, claiming that it focuses too much on the son rather than on the Father and that the character in the story who is truly prodigal is God the Father. He is willing to waste his love on a child who isn’t worth it. For that reason I have called this sermon “Reflections on the Prodigal,” not reflections on the prodigal son. I am convinced that God’s love is more prodigal than the reckless living of this wayward son.

First among these reflections is to state the obvious. The Father in the story is God. The two sons are us. Parables cannot always be interpreted allegorically, but this story of a man and his two sons is intended to be seen that way. I might add that another problem with the title (The Parable of the Prodigal Son) is that you are led to believe that there is only one son, not two. I have actually heard sermons that quit at the return of the wayward son, thus never dealing with the second son. You corrupt the story Jesus tells when you do that.

A second reflection builds on the first. If the Father in the story is God, and the two sons are us, which son are you?

Years ago when I taught literature to high school seniors I would always suggest that you stand a far better chance of understanding what you read if you can find a place in the story. If you were in this novel or play or short story, what part would you play? I think that method of interpretation works equally well with biblical literature.

I know I'm not the Father in this parable, but am I the younger brother dying to leave home and thereby break all bonds with my family? Or am I the faithful son, hard-working and allegiant to my Father to the point that I am mired down in the ugly realm of self-righteousness? Was I once the younger son and now I am the older son? Do I still have a bit of both in me? Am I still eager to break away from God who gives me life? Or do I stay home with him but do so for all the wrong reasons? Where is my place in the story? Was I the prodigal son at 25 and now the faithful son at 65? How has my vision shifted but possibly not improved?

Third, the parable tells us and therefore reaffirms what we learn in the opening chapters of the Bible where we find the creation stories in Genesis, and that lesson is this: we can have life only when we are tied to God. Anything less than that is only an approximation of life, but it isn't life. Life is given by God, and life remains life only when we are tied to God. The prodigal son finds himself in the squalor of a pig sty. Remember, he's a faithful Jew who doesn't eat pork and shouldn't even be near pigs, yet he has been relegated to this terrible plight.

And then the Bible --- actually Jesus --- gives us one the most prosaic lines in all of literature. "When he came to himself . . ." That's the way it reads, but you stand a good chance of understanding it if it were written, "When he came to his self . . ." His self, his very personhood, had gone on sabbatical. His self had left him. He had foolishly left his self to gain the world, and in the pig sty his self -- if you want, you can say his soul --- came back to him. He awakens to the joy of knowing that his self is tied to his Father. Without God he has no self.

God the Father created a world where the errant son was surrounded and fed by an abundance of good gifts, and so he races back to the source of life to live as a hired servant as long as he is in his Father's house.

We have life only when we are tied to God. A godless life is no life at all. The parable is saying, "Don't surrender your self to the world. Surrender your self to God!"

Fourth, in God's kingdom we often don't get back what we lost, but that's OK, as long as we don't lose God the Father. The Father and the elder brother don't get back the property lost by the younger son. It is lost forever. Now, when it will be divided after the father dies, the elder brother will only get a quarter of the former estate. The elder brother will pay for his younger brother's sin. That property is lost forever. What the elder brother *didn't* lose was his brother and his Father.

But he resents what his brother had done and especially the treatment he receives upon his return. The prodigal gets the fatted calf, the ring, the robe, and new sandals. The elder brother is resentful.

I would be too. This just doesn't seem fair. I stayed home. I was never disobedient. I worked hard for God. I never asked for special favors. I certainly never squandered God's good gifts. But God the Father never threw a party for me. It just doesn't seem fair.

Only yesterday in our local paper did I read this in the advice column:

*Dear Annie: Ten years ago, my father passed away, leaving my mother well provided for. Since then she has spent nearly 80 percent of the estate on herself, my brother, and his children. My brother is her favorite child. He has had an up-and-down career. When times are good, he spends a lot of money. When times are bad, he runs to Mom. In the past two years, he has steadily taken money from her, and her assets are now frighteningly low.*

*I put myself through college, lived beneath my means, and have saved a great deal. Mom is now eyeing what I have put aside, expecting me to use it to support her, as well as the “golden child” and the now-adult grandchildren. This has brought up old ill feelings of the way she treated us on our birthdays and holidays.*

*Part of me wants to provide for my mother’s needs, as I feel it is my duty. But another part wants to tell her to find support from the son she always indulged. I really can’t talk to anybody about this without feeling terrible.  
Can you help?*

It doesn’t seem fair because it isn’t. God’s grace isn’t fair, and you better hope it never is fair because if it were, you and I would never be saved, redeemed, justified, and sanctified.

We don’t deserve what we are given. We deserve death, but God gives us life. We deserve hell, but God gives us heaven. We deserve condemnation, but God gives us love. You don’t want God to be fair or the only possibilities in your future are hellish.

Fifth, God’s love is ready to receive us even before we seek God’s forgiveness. Did you notice this in the parable? When the prodigal comes to his senses (that’s another way of translating verse 17), he rehearses his lines: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” Again, our attention is too much on the son. What is God doing while the son is rehearsing his lines of repentance? He is looking out on the horizon. He is waiting and expecting him to come home. Luke tells us, “But while the son was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” He has accepted and forgiven his son before he utters a word of repentance. Before we have even said the first word in the Prayer of Confession each Sunday morning, God has forgiven us. He is waiting, yearning for us to come back to him. So why do we have confession? To teach us humility. To prevent us from becoming arrogant. To remind us that everything we have is a gift from God.

One last reflection: God's grace is not a comparative study. The elder brother can't understand that. Never worry about what God has given others. Celebrate what God has given you. The Bible speaks of the elder brother this way: "Then he became angry and refused to go in." He refused to go into God's house. He felt cheated. God's grace is not a pitcher being filled. It is a pitcher overflowing.

My wife's sister Jean has six children. Leslie and I have two. If you think about this mathematically or even logically, our children got more love than Jean's six children. But human love and God's grace don't work like that. All six of Jean's children felt just as much love as our two boys. Love is not a commodity. It doesn't run out. Because God loves the prodigal son, his love for the elder brother is in no way diminished. There's enough love for both of them *and* for you and me as well!