

LENT 4 2010 "The 3 Prodigals"
II Cor. 5:16-21 and Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The gospel lesson today is about 3 prodigals. Yes, three prodigals. The term "prodigal" means extravagant, spendthrift, wasteful. The word itself does not occur in the Bible. The title of this familiar parable has been given to the parable by the tradition of the church...the spendthrift, wasteful, extravagant son.

The younger son certainly was prodigal, spendthrift, wasteful. He inherited 1/3rd of the estate and he liquidated it and took off into a far country where he devoured his money in loose living. Let your imagination run wild, this poor boy did it all. He ended up living a life similar to someone described on Oprah or Dr. Phil as radically dysfunctional..."Tomorrow we meet a "MAN WHO LIVES WITH PIGS!!!"

Isn't that the lure of the world? The ingredients that seem to attract people into a far country are hyped daily on TV. The foolish young fellow in our parable was convinced that he was missing out on "real life", by staying home. So off he went, as someone has said, **"to drown himself in the well of his own libido."**

Maybe he thought he would find "real life" out in the "real world" away from home. What he found was a pig sty. We can all identify with the temptation this young man faced. We also find ourselves attracted to the allurements of a wild life. The siren song of the world tempts us to leave home and dive headlong into the sordid pleasures of the world. When we're young we want to experience life...and so we are tempted to do wild and crazy things.

The reason any person leaves a safe, stable home for the glitz of a far country is because he or she doesn't think that home is a place where you find true happiness, fulfillment and love. We easily fall into the trap of **"Looking for love in all the wrong places." That's what the younger son did. It is a mistake most of us make. We think that life is "out there" somewhere. We think that "life will begin sometime in the future." We think, "When I grow up, then I'll really be living" or "When I get married, then I'll really be living." or "If I had a different spouse then I would really be living" or "When the kids leave home and I retire, then I'll really be living."**

Of course, that philosophy isn't true. Life doesn't begin "out there" in the future. It is found right here and now. Today is as real as it gets. So what you make of today is important. This is life right here, as you sit here at Zion Lutheran Church on a Sunday morning in March...life isn't going to get any more real than it is today. So make the most of today. The prodigal son wasted his days dreaming fanciful dreams about "what he was missing" until he missed out on the good life all around him. He considered his life so pale and placid that he gave it all up for a fantasy that existed only in his mind or on TV.

There is a book by the Jewish author Harold Kushner titled "What to do when all you've ever wanted isn't enough." The title is intriguing. The author makes a case for the emptiness of accumulation and the importance of relationships. We find meaning in life in community, in relationships with other people. Wanting more, more, more things is a never-ending escalator that never satisfies. The emptiness of accumulation catches up with us eventually. Having it all isn't enough after all.

The younger son, like so many today, "wanted it all". So he spent his inheritance in "riotous living". And when it was all spent, he still felt empty. He fell victim to "The Big Lie". The lie that life and happiness is found in pampering and catering to the self. He lived with-in himself and discovered too late that joy is found in responsible relationships. As such, he wasted his fortune and his life. He was a prodigal.

The Older Brother

I said that this was the story of 3 prodigals. The second prodigal was the older brother. He was wasteful in a different way. He fell into the ditch on the opposite side of the road. He wasted years of his life working under the self-illusion that he was a high-class slave in the household instead of the first born son and heir of 2/3rds of the estate.

He was a legalist, uptight & conservative. He could have used some of his brother's free spirit. His obedience to the father was of the rigid, unbending variety. He knew no joy in the father's love. The elder son loved law and order so much that he became imprisoned by it. He didn't allow himself the joy and freedom of being a son and heir. He wasted his

life laboring under self-imposed limitations. His work became drudgery because it was done grimly as a duty with no thrill, no joy, and no love.

Now, the elder son was not a bad man. In fact, he was a very good man. He was a hard worker, honest, dedicated to his work...the perfect employee. But his goodness was rigid and hard and unlovely. It lacked compassion and mercy. Did the elder son try to talk his younger brother into staying home? Who knows. He probably thought his younger brother was an ungrateful, foolish playboy.

We are all found somewhere between these two extreme examples. Our lives are a mixture of rebellion and responsibility and we vacillate between these 2 extremes all our life.

The Father

The third and most important prodigal in our story was the father. He was spendthrift and wasteful and extravagant in his love toward both his sons. The younger son who had sinned deliberately, he had forgiven. To the elder son who was hard-hearted he was understanding.

The father held nothing back. He was open hearted, open handed, generous, extravagant in his love...he was, in a word, prodigal.

Helmut Tielichke, German pastor, wrote a book entitled "The Waiting Father." That makes a good title for this parable also. The father waited for his first prodigal son to come home from the far country. Imagine if you will, this old man whose good heart was broken when his younger son left home for the far country. How he must have yearned for his son to return. How he must have waited up nights, unable to sleep, worrying about his lost son. No doubt the neighbors said, "**He broods too much over that ungrateful son.**" The old man probably wrote his son letters that were never read. He called repeatedly, only to get an answering machine. Maybe he even watched the episode on Ophra's TV. show, "Man Living With Pigs" and it broke his heart.

And then one day as he sat on his front porch he saw a familiar figure walking toward the house. He recognized it as his son and he jumped up and ran down the lane to meet his lost son. You can almost hear his wife calling after him from the kitchen as the old man ran down the

lane..."Jacob, remember your heart!" But the old man ran anyway, eager to welcome home his son who was lost.

And that son was forgiven and welcomed back into the father's house again. The father didn't even wait for the son to finish his little prepared speech. He said, **"Bring a robe and shoes and a ring, kill the fatted calf and celebrate with me, for my son who was lost is found!"** A prodigal father!

And what about the older son who was a good man but a hard man who refused to welcome his brother home?. The father also went out to coax this older son to come to the homecoming party.

You and I are like the sons...some of us have run off into far countries and discovered that life there isn't all it's cracked up to be. Others among us have always walked the straight and narrow, but in the process have not allowed ourselves to experience the freedom and joy of living in the father's house.

When we go our prodigal ways, our loving God calls us back, "Come home to where you are loved" "Come home to where you find life" "Come home to where you belong." "Come home."

There are lessons we learn from each of these prodigals. But what makes this lesson one of the most loved stories in Scripture is the prodigal nature of the father who loves with an extravagant love that forgives and welcomes sinners home. The Bible says **"See what love the father has for us that we should be called the children of God!"**

So when you go to bed tonight - thank God for His prodigal mercy. And when you wake up in the morning thank God for his prodigal grace that meets you at dawn and follows you thru the day and even broods and worries over you when you drift into the far country. And thank God for Jesus who came to live and to die that you might be reconciled with this loving father. Let us pray...

Prayer: God give us grateful hearts that receive your love with gladness. Give us faith to believe that our prodigal lives are covered with the forgiveness that comes from the cross of Jesus. Thank you for your great love for us. In Jesus' name we pray. AMEN