

Sermon for March 6, 2016
"What Would You Do?"

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

One day some of the church folk - you know the kind: the ones always carryin' Bibles to church and wearin' ties with religious stuff written on them. Well some of these folk began complaining that Jesus was hangin' around with the wrong sort of people. And he wasn't just polite to them. He spent time with them. He even went to their houses to eat.

So Jesus told them a few stories. One was about man who had a hundred sheep and lost one. He searched for it and then rejoiced when he found it. The other was about a woman who had ten coins and lost one. She searched until she found it and she rejoiced too.

Then in conclusion he told a story that, if he had told it in our day, might have gone something like this:

"Once there was this man who had two sons. This man owned a business with a large corporate headquarters in an industrial park out near the airport. His two sons were his partners: "Father and Son's Inc." The younger son barged into his office one day and said, 'Drop dead old man! I'm sick and tired of this job and I'm sick and tired of you. I'm tired of waiting for you to croak so I can get mine so just give me half of your assets now.' The Father could have fired the son then and there, had security escort him off the premises and then called his lawyer to have him written out of the will. But instead he called his accountant and arranged for half of his assets to be given to the boy.

"Then the younger son caught the next plane to Los Vegas where he threw away his fortune on wine, show girls, and gambling. Soon the money ran out. The country was in the middle of a recession so the only job he could get was as a migrant worker. So he traveled from place to place picking crops for less than minimum wage. He was so destitute that sometimes he would put the produce he was picking in his pockets and eat it later. Then one day when the boss man was particularly mean, he realized, 'My Father never treated anyone like this. Even the people in the mail room got a decent wage and benefits. I'll go home and beg him to take me on at the bottom of the ladder for I am no longer worthy to be his son.'

"So the son hitchhiked home. Well the Father was looking out the window of his office when he saw a lone figure walking down the road. He quickly took the executive elevator down to the lobby and ran across the parking lot. He stopped only for a moment at the security booth to borrow a pair of binoculars. When he saw it was really his son he ran to meet him. When he got to his son he threw his arms around him and hugged him and kissed him. The boy tried to tell his father that he was unworthy to be his son and that he just wanted a job no matter how menial. But by then the security guard had caught up with them and the Father told him. Get my son some decent clothes. I have an extra Armani in the executive wash room. Get him and executive ID and key card. Call the caterers and give everyone the afternoon off with pay! My son who was dead is alive again; he was lost but now is found.'

"Now the older son had been off on a business trip was just coming back from the airport. As he pulled up to the security booth he could see through the large plate glass windows and party going on in the lobby. He thought 'who could they be having a party for. Maybe it's for me! After all I have been picking up a few extra accounts lately. Maybe my father wants to congratulate me!' He tried not to act like he already knew what was going on when he asked the guard, 'Who's the party for?' It was a shock when the guard

said, 'It's your brother. He came back earlier today and your father is throwing him a party!'

"This infuriated the older brother. He had been working twice as hard to fill in for what his lazy brother had taken. 'This lazy bum had thrown away half his father's hard earned money. And now they were celebrating his return. What next!' The older brother slammed his car into park and just sat there fuming.

"It wasn't long before the Father heard about it and went out to the parking lot to talk to his oldest son and to ask him to come to the party. But the oldest son said, 'Look, my whole life I have been working my fingers to the bone for you. I have haggled with vendors and gone off on trips to visit clients and close accounts. I have always done what you wanted, and never once did you throw a party for me. I am the one who deserves a party not this freeloader. He took your money and wasted it on gambling and show girls and you welcome him like he's the prince of England for heavens sakes.'

"But the father said, 'Look you have been with me and all that is mine is yours, and let me tell you I really do appreciate all that you have done for our family, but your brother was lost. We didn't know if he was dead or alive, but now he is found. Let's rejoice and be happy that he is alive and back home.'"

What was that? Oh yes, what did the older son do? Did he go join the party? Well, I don't rightly know; Jesus never said. What would you do?

The story of the prodigal son is one of the best known and loved of Jesus' parables. I think that is because it gets at the heart of the Christian faith. It exposes and accents the foundation of faith and makes us aware of the grace of God. We call this story "The Prodigal Son." The word "prodigal" means extravagant but perhaps a more contemporary word would be extreme. Because the son is so extravagant in his lifestyle it is called the prodigal son.

But the son is not the only one in this story that goes to extremes. It could also be called "The Prodigal Father." The Father goes to extremes of forgiveness and grace in welcoming the son. Any boy of mine wouldn't have gotten away with what he did. But that just shows me how much I need to grow.

Perhaps we should call the story "The Prodigal God." That is ultimately what the story is all about. God's love for us is extravagant and God's grace is amazing. We rebelled against God and yet God sent the only son to die for us. You just don't get more extreme than that!

But the story doesn't end with the grace of the father. It ends with the choice of the older son. The one who stayed at home and helped out. The one who did the right thing. Will he join the party?

Jesus tells three stories of things that were lost being found and their owners rejoicing. Then he tacks on to the last one someone who is not happy about it. Perhaps because the religious people of Jesus' day were not happy about the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus wanted them to join the party and rejoice that the lost were being found.

So "The Prodigal Son" demonstrated for us the extravagant love and grace of God. But it also invited us to join in. It invites us to show the same extravagant grace and love. And that is the foundation of faith. God has loved us with an extravagant love, so we should love others in the same extreme way!

So what **will** you do?