

Sermon for March 31, 2019  
“Prodigals”

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The story of the Prodigal. Many of us know the story. I have preached on it a number of times and it has been in Sunday School lessons and Bible studies. Many of you know the story already. So maybe you can help me.

A father had how many sons? “2” The youngest came to him and what did he ask for? “His share of the inheritance.” Did the father give it to him? “Yes” What did he do with the money? “Spent it on extravagant living.” When he had burned through his money and was destitute, he came to his senses and decided to do what? “Go Home.” Did the father welcome him? “Yes, with open arms.” Everyone has an A on this test. Now the bonus questions: Did the older brother welcome him home? “Not at first.”

Many of us are familiar with the story of the prodigal, perhaps too familiar with it. For instance, we call it the story of “The Prodigal Son” but the word “prodigal” doesn’t appear in the story? So, what does “prodigal” even mean? It means “recklessly extravagant.” We call it the prodigal “son” because the son was extravagant in his life style. The Father was also extravagant in his acceptance of the son. But they may not be the only prodigals in this story.

So to illustrate what I mean let me tell you another story.

Tom was a farmer, but he wasn’t your average run of the mill farmer. His wife liked say that he was all thumbs, and they were all green. Tom just had a natural affinity for growing things. He and his wife had built up the best organic farm in the state. They only used organic fertilizers and natural pest repellents. The result was that Tom’s farm was known all round and the best source of organically grown fruits and vegetables. He had by far the best tomatoes in the county, if not the state. Organic markets and upscale restaurants from all over did business with him. This farm was his life’s work.

Tom loved his farm, but if there was anything he loved more, it was his kids. And working the farm meant he could spend time with them. He could take them out and they would pick tomatoes or care for the strawberries together. He tried to instill in his children his love and respect for the gifts of God and for the beauty of growing. Tom enjoyed watching plants grow and felt a huge sense of pride from his farm, but he received so much more from watching his children grow.

Tom’s farm wasn’t the biggest farm around. In fact, it was small compared to most others. He could have expanded. He had the room. There were portions that they left fallow and let grow wild. It was partially out of respect for the natural ecosystem, but Tom felt no need to cultivate those areas. He always said “Quality not Quantity,” so he concentrated on doing the best with what he was already doing.

All this came under attack one day when the police showed up on his doorstep with a warrant, but they didn’t search the house at first. They went out to one of those undeveloped parts of the farm, and the officers came out of the woods with the evidence: Marijuana. They cuffed Tom, read him his rights and took him to the county lock-up where he was fingerprinted, booked, and held. He could lose the farm and everything he had built up.

But when the truth came out it was worse than that. The investigators soon realized that Tom was not the guilty party even though the drugs were on his land. It was his youngest son. He had been growing it in a clearing and dealing at college.

Tom was cleared of all charges, but it had already been in the newspapers. His reputation in the community had been soiled. The phrase “from the Organic farm” was said with snickers, and meant more than good fruits and vegetables. He even lost a few contracts because of it all. But that was nothing compared to what happened to his son. The boy was tried and sentenced to the state prison. Tom and his wife tried to visit the boy, but he refused to see them. They finally stopped trying.

When the time came for his son to get out of prison Tom waited and watched. He imagined a scene like the movies where the greyhound bus pulls up the front walk and lets the wayward son off. But it didn't happen. The time of his release came and went. Tom's youngest son seemed to fall off the face of the earth.

After years of getting in and out of trouble the boy finally found himself in a hospital dying. He knew his opportunities to apologize to his parents for all he had done to them were fading quickly. He didn't even know if they would accept his apology, but he had to try. He had the hospital chaplain contact Tom.

Tom made the 500-mile drive to see his son. It was a tearful reunion, healing all the hurts of the years. As Tom questioned the doctors about his son's condition, they said that there was a new experimental treatment. It was promising, but there were no guarantees. It would require a bone marrow transplant from a suitable donor. Tom was tested immediately, and was a match. It would require that they stick large needles into the largest of his bones and extract marrow. He would be sedated, but he would be very sore for a few days.

They did the procedure and after months Tom's son came home. They had a huge celebration for him. Some of the other children didn't come, which disappointed Tom, but his youngest son who was lost was now home!

No, it's not the story of the “prodigal son.” It lacks some of its finer points, but it was inspired by Jesus' story. Tom, the father, had been truly hurt by what his son had done to himself and others. Yet in the end, he went out of his way to reach out to the boy. He even allowed them to stick needles deep into his bones to save his life.

That brings us to the other prodigal in the story: God. Jesus' story is really about God's love and extravagant acceptance of us. The things that we do to hurt ourselves and each other truly hurt God, just as Tom's son's action hurt him. God loves the world God has created and had tried to teach us how to care for the garden, but we often end up growing things in it that are sinful and hurtful.

Yet the Prodigal God is always ready to welcome us back. In fact, in Jesus he came to us. Some rejected him, but some accepted him. And our prodigal God let them drive nails into his hands and feet to save us.

We are all prodigals. We have all extravagantly cultivated weed of sin on our lives. But God has even more extravagantly saved us. The story of the prodigal is not about some guy who lived way back in Bible times. It's about us, God's prodigal children, and the love of our prodigal Heavenly Father.