

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt  
Fourth Sunday in Lent - Year C  
St. Paul's Lutheran Church  
Joshua 5:9-12  
Psalm 32  
2 Corinthians 5:16-21  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
03/27/2022

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

1Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.] 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” 3So he told them this parable: 11b“There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’

20So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. 25“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

The Gospel of Our Lord

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

### **The Prodigal Who?**

Good morning! In the early 2000's a craze swept the country. From A-list celebrities to your neighbor next door, they all wanted the adorable and innocent... tea-cup pig. The cute little guys made appearances in hit tv shows like "How I Met Your Mother" and even Paris Hilton got one that she famously took with her to the red carpet. But as the prologue in Lord of the Rings says, "they were all of them deceived." It turns out that while tea-cup pigs are very tiny when young, they don't stay that way for long. The average "tea-cup" pig grows to a size of 150-200 lbs. So, while you can fit them in your palm when young, they grow to a size that makes that just a little bit difficult. Now here's the crazy thing, in the world of pigs, that's still considered small. The average pig, like the one that goes to market, weighs 500 lbs. and can go all the way up to 700! While looking up some of these statistics I saw someone who mentioned that wild hogs and boar have been known to weigh over 1,000 lbs. I thought that was stretching it until I looked up the record for the largest pig. His name was, appropriately, Big Bill, and he clocked in at a massive 2,552 lbs! That's about the same as a Chevy Aveo.

I tell you all of this so that we can set the stage for the life that the Prodigal Son endures. It would not have been a fun life living next to 500 lbs pigs who would literally eat anything, who roll around in mud and... less desirable things. But that's getting ahead of ourselves. First we need to deal with the traditional title of this biblical story. "The Prodigal Son" is a story so well known that it's seeped into most of the fabric of Western society. But as R. Alan Culpepper points out, *"to call it 'The Prodigal Son' is to emphasize the first half of the parable to the neglect of the second half."* He

recommends the title “*A Man Had Two Sons.*”<sup>1</sup> I have a better title, but we’ll get to that later.

The challenge of preaching on a Bible story so well known is that I need to somehow make the text new and interesting, all the while reiterating the details that we all think we already know. Traditionally, the story was seen symbolically as representing Jews and Gentiles. The Gentile goes and squanders away his inheritance, but returns to God and repents. Meanwhile, the faithful Jew has been serving all these years. But there is an even older interpretation that I owe to Cyril of Alexandria for hearing about. At some point in the 400’s he writes “*It is of the opinion of some that the two sons signify the holy angels and us earth dwellers. The elder one, who lived soberly, represents the company of the holy angels, while the younger and prodigal son is the human race.*”<sup>2</sup> Have you ever heard that one? Regardless, I think it shows us something that we can easily forget. Parables can often have several different meanings, all of which hold a piece of validity and all of which can speak to the varied experiences of a vast array of people. So rather than stick to one rigid interpretation, let’s just dig through the story and see what we find.

Our story actually takes place at the end of two other parables, the lost sheep and the lost coin. It serves as a capstone, a way of bringing together all of what Jesus had spoken. This was all done in response to a group of Pharisees and lawyers who complain when Jesus eats with sinners.

So Jesus tells them about two sons, the younger of which asks his father for his share of the inheritance. Basically the son is telling the father

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<sup>1</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 8. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 247.

<sup>2</sup> Just, Arthur A. *Luke. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003. p. 248.

that he wishes he were dead so that he could have some cash. Even with this level of disrespect, the father agrees, and the son goes off and blows it all away in a distant land. We can't be sure, but the Greek words seem to suggest it was spent in less than savory ways. He loses it all, and descends into worse and worse living conditions, finally spending time in a swine pen, with, as we discussed, some giant, hungry, and dirty animals. They eat carob pods, which Culpepper writes were "*common in the Mediterranean area, [and] were used primarily as animal fodder, but human beings ate them in times of famine.*"<sup>3</sup> But the son's time with the swine is worse than you can imagine. This is because pigs were considered ritually unclean. Absolutely no Jew would find themselves in such deplorable conditions. The young son has truly lost everything, even his cultural faith.

But the young man comes to his senses and decides to beg his father for a life as a common servant. While traveling back to his homeland, he rehearses what he will say to his father. But as he nears the home, his father sees him in the distance and rushes to meet him. This is the next dramatic detail that we can miss. No self-respecting adult would RUN to a person below them, especially one who had slighted them as the son did. But run he does, interrupting the young man before he can even finish his rehearsed speech. He lavishes upon him so much more than the son could have hoped for, calling for a cloak, a signet ring that would mark him as part of the family, sandals, and even calls for the fatted calf to be slaughtered. Culpepper writes that "*Meat was not a part of the daily diet and was normally reserved for special events.*"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 8. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 249.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 250.

I want us to focus on the experience between the young son and the father today. Because while analogies for the older son can be made for a great many things, it's what we have in common with the young son that I think is the most valuable today. Which brings us to the better title. I can't take credit for it, it's from Niveen Sarras, a Palestinian born pastor serving in Wisconsin. She writes that *"This parable should not be called the prodigal son but 'God's prodigal love.'"*<sup>5</sup> Man, that just hits the nail right on the head!

You see, the word prodigal means to spend or give extravagantly, and we are the prodigal son, sinning with free abandon. But it's God's prodigal love that embraces us like the father in the story. So, listen to the words of the Church Father Ambrose, who writes *"Rise and run to the church. Here is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He who hears you pondering in secret places of the mind runs to you. When you are still far away, he sees you and runs to you. He sees your heart. He runs... and he embraces you... he falls on your neck to raise one prostrate and burdened with sins and bring back one turned aside to the earthly toward heaven. Christ falls on your neck to free your neck from the yoke of slavery and hang his sweet yoke upon your shoulders."*<sup>6</sup>

God loves you and is waiting to forgive you. *"The journey home begins with coming to oneself. That means that the most difficult step is the first one."*<sup>7</sup> So, friends, what do you say we come to our senses? Let's go home, where we can find prodigal love overflowing. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-151-3-11b-32-5>

<sup>6</sup> Just, Arthur A. *Luke. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003. p. 250.

<sup>7</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 8. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 252.