

THE PRODIGAL FATHER
Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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I opened my planning file on Monday morning to see what text I had planned for today's sermon. Ah, the Prodigal Son story! I leaned back in my chair and thought, "What was I thinking? Is there anything new to say about the Prodigal Son?" How many of you think you know just about everything I am about to say? Could there be anyone out there who has not heard sermon after sermon on this story? It is so familiar that our eyes begin to glaze over when we hear it, and our minds wander to whatever we're planning to do after the worship service today.

I

So I thought, what is this really about? And the answer came immediately: it is about family. That explains why it has remained such a well-loved story over all the centuries. It's about family. And everybody has some kind of experience with family. To read it in church is to hear it in the context of a church family. That's important, as Helen Prejean has pointed out. She has written "You can't just read this parable quietly to yourself. It's too mythic. What you have to do is gather some people and read it- no, perform it- out loud in front of God and everybody, then you'll

get it. It's a tale of twists and turns and it takes a community to figure it out.¹

There is a screaming question in this parable: where is the mother? Everybody is some momma's child, and the prodigal son is no exception. In fact, his mom had at least two children, and she surely ached for both of them. Yet her voice is silent in this parable. It's all about the father, all about the brothers, but no word from the mother.

We can be sure that she is present. This story is about family, and it's about losing sleep at night because you are worrying about your children. It's about decisions made that you wish you could un-make. It's about the father wondering if he made the right decision by giving the son his inheritance. It's about the older brother wondering if his younger brother is having all the fun while he is stuck tending the farm at home. It is about the younger son coming to himself in a far country and making the decision to come home.

And it's about the mother— you can be sure that it is also about her.

Here is a portion of a poem about the prodigal son's mother:

How many times in the dark of night
 Did the tears slide down her face?
 Did she get out of bed
 And fall on her knees,

¹ Sr. Helen Prejean, CSJ, author of *Dead Man Walking*.

Just to pray that her boy was safe?

How were the days when she did not know?
 Was he alive? Was he warm? Was he well?
 Who were his friends?
 And where did he sleep?
 Was there anyone there she could tell?

But, oh, on that day when she looked down the road
 As she had looked since her son went away,
 Did love unspeakable flood her soul?
 Did she cry?
 What did she say?

I think when the father had welcomed their son
 And the boy had greeted his brother,
 That the servants made a path
 For him to enter the door
 And the waiting arms of his mother.²

It is a story about family, about the intricate relationships forged in the intimacy of family. It is about compassion and love for your child in the worst of times. It is about not giving up ever. And it is about believing in someone and giving someone another chance no matter what he has done or where he has gone.

Ultimately, this story is not just about this one nuclear family of parents and two boys; it's also about grandparents and aunts and uncles and any sisters who might have been there. It's about an extended

² <http://www.momof9space.com/waywardchildren.html>.

community who have a stake in every child in their presence, just as we all have a stake in every child and every family in our midst.

It is about the hunger we all have for wisdom shared in an extended family. Did the younger son meet someone in the far country who cared enough to speak wisdom to him? Out there where he was tending the hogs and hoping to eat a scrap of the hog food, did he encounter someone who reminded him that his home and his home's values were not so boring or as dumb as he thought?

This story is indeed about family, so we all have a stake in it.

II

I once heard of a sermon outline on this story that consisted of three words: madness, sadness, and gladness. I suppose that sums up the story in three words. Not bad, but still not what I was looking for. We could focus on the older brother. There are plenty of people who suffer quietly, feeling under-appreciated most of the time. There are plenty of people who do the right thing and forgo the excitement of going to any far country. They stay at home and do the work. They follow the rules, pay their taxes, go to bed at a decent time, and eat their vegetables. No celebrations for them, just a gold watch at retirement.

But here we are, telling the old, old story once again, and each of us hearing it from the prism of our own experience. We may identify with the unreliability of the younger brother, or we may identify with the dependability of the older brother. We may identify with the father or the mother.

We can all think of prodigal sons or daughters who have yet to figure out that it is time to come home. We know of people who waste their lives running from the rules. And we know about trying to navigate through a culture dominated by the values of indiscriminate consumption and instant gratification. Has there ever been a time when deep extended family relationships are more needed than they are today?

Never make the mistake of thinking church family is unimportant. Church community is part of a deep education, the education of a soul, and it becomes even more important in a market-saturated, media-dominated, celebrity-worshipping, fashion-aspiring, image-enhancing, profit-manipulating, internet-driven, world in which tweets become the deepest conversation people have.

III

This is a story we read at many different levels, but here is one that hit me this week. Church is composed of both prodigals and older

brothers. But church is also filled with people who love like God loves. It is filled with people who, if they knew where to search, would go out and find the prodigal in the pig sty, take him home, show him to the shower, loan him a suit, and go with him to talk with his father. Church is full of people who want to welcome home anyone and everyone who wants the party of God's grace. Church at its best is prodigal—prodigal like the father, whose love was so prodigal that it overflowed the cup of reason.

Church at its best reaches out to both brothers, reaches out to the mothers and fathers who are aching to embrace their children, reaches out to sisters and uncles and aunts who wish they could do something, reaches out to all God's children who are filled with hurt and anxiety and heartache and longing.

IV

So the story really is about family, this family. It's about listening for the music of the party and drifting in see younger brothers and older brothers reconciling; it's about mothers having a voice when their voice has been silenced from the story; it's about pent-up anger and resentment being laid aside in order to dance to the rhythm of love.

It's about a community's prodigal love, opening its arms and inviting you to come to the party and to join the dance. The music from the party

drifts into every worship service, every committee meeting, every act of caring, every home and every family. The good news is that we have received a gift from God: a love so prodigal that it can only be called grace.

It is a love absolutely determined to wait for us and to welcome us, to greet us and to give us an identity within the family no matter how far we have roamed into a far country. If you are just standing outside the door listening to the music and the laughter, if you catch a whiff of the fatted calf roasting on the hearth, come on in! You are all invited to the party.