

The Prodigal God
Associate Pastor Adam M.L. Tice
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Luke 15:11-32

On the junior youth retreat last weekend we partied hard. On Friday night, we gorged ourselves on snacks (both healthy and unhealthy) and roasted marshmallows for s'mores. We laughed a lot, ran around, played games and stayed up past our bedtimes. The sugar buzz could have powered a small village.

The next day, after more eating and hiking, we sat down to study today's Gospel reading. After such a raucous evening, perhaps it is natural that my mind was drawn to the bits of the story about partying.

Depending on which translation you are reading, the younger son squanders his inheritance on either "dissolute" or "wild" living. I imagine he went out and partied hard. We're not told in detail what exactly this means. The only hint at a detail we get is from his older brother late in the story. The bitter eldest son accuses him of squandering the inheritance on prostitutes. I'm not sure how he could make such a claim without having spoken to the younger son yet, unless they were exchanging post-cards.

At any rate, we know that the time away was disgraceful. Jesus gives all kinds of cues as to the impropriety of the son: requesting inheritance before a death, squandering property and, perhaps most embarrassing for a Jew, working among pigs. He reaches a point of such desperation that he would prefer servitude in his father's house to squalor in the foreign land.

But here's the funny thing about this story. After Jesus has given us all this set-up about the son's impropriety and wild ways, we get a big second dose of impropriety — from the father! In fact, I think that Jesus' description of the father's actions intentionally mirrors the earlier actions of the son.

The sequences begin with socially inappropriate interactions between the two. The son demands inheritance from a father who isn't quite dead yet; and the father, ignoring middle-eastern standards for behavior, runs to meet his wayward child. The expectation would have been for a father to stand stoically, not embarrass himself by hiking up his robes and running.

The next part of both stories involves wild living and waste. Note that the word "prodigal" means wasteful, overly generous and squandering. The son, as we saw, wastes his inheritance on wild living. And the father, upon the son's return, does exactly the same thing. He gives the son a robe, a ring and sandals. They kill the fatted calf and party it up. They have a wild party — raucous enough that the elder son hears the dancing and music as he approaches the house.

So right away the proper "Mennonite" interpretation of the parable flies out the window. This isn't a morality tale about wastefulness. Neither the father nor the son were taking their cues from the *More With Less* cookbook. Last I checked, there is no recipe for "fatted calf" in *Simply in Season*.

By drawing these parallels between father and son, Jesus makes it clear that money isn't the issue. Nor is partying. It isn't about propriety.

This is a story of a child returning to where he belongs, and the father's joy in the return. The condition of the son and even the circumstances of the

separation aren't important. What matters is that what once was lost is now found.

This story comes at the tail end of a trilogy. First is the parable of the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go find the one that wandered away. Next is the woman who lost a coin and turned her house upside down to find it, and then throws a party when it turns up.

These three stories come as Jesus' response to an accusation from the Pharisees. They observed the typical audience for Jesus' stories and the usual suspects among Jesus' followers and said, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

These stories are Jesus' way of saying, "Of course I do!" But perhaps Jesus' definition of a sinner was a bit different than that of the legalistic Pharisees. Jesus doesn't dwell on the moral status of the wayward sheep. Nor does he comment on the spiritual condition of the coin. He's vague about the son and depicts the father in some behavior that the Pharisees might have considered sinful. So what does all of this have to do with the tax collectors and prostitutes that Jesus hung out with?

The emphasis in these stories is on absence and recovery. Jesus might, in fact, define "sin" as absence from God — a state of separation. Repentance is in the return. Thus a righteous person — someone who keeps the law, follows all the rules and does all the right things — might still be distant from God. Likewise, a person whom the law identifies as unclean or unworthy might well find a place

next to Jesus at the banquet table. This is why the elder son in today's parable was so cranky — it isn't a system based on fairness or reciprocity, but on grace.

An added twist to this idea of absence and return is the role of God in each story. God the shepherd goes into the wilderness to seek the lost sheep. As a woman who loses her coin, God sweeps the entire house until she finds it. Only in the story of the son do we see what is lost playing a role in being found again, and even here God the father runs to meet him and restores him to his place in the family without condition.

For a faith tradition like ours which places a high premium on right practice of faith, these stories of grace may seem troubling. Does this mean that nothing at all is expected of a follower of Christ? What about turning from sin? What about repentance?

I suppose the answer lies in our assumptions about what happens to the son next. After he was happily restored to his father's house, did he gradually slide back into his wanton ways? Did he take advantage of his father's generosity?

Or did the experience of his father running to him, of receiving the undeserved gifts, the robe, the ring, the sandals and the memory of the family's celebration — did all of this begin a transformation in him? Did the experience of grace lead him into new life?

Clearly, the story can go either way. But I suspect that the father in the story would be ready and waiting to embrace the child, no matter how many times he runs away and returns.

Perhaps the lesson here is that we ought to party more. We should tell one another the stories of our encounters with God and of those experiences of grace that define us. For some of us, those types of stories might sound unfamiliar. Perhaps we are like the older brother, standing outside and wondering what all the fuss is about. But the party is for us too! God is unbelievably generous. There is enough fatted calf (and for this crowd, fatted tofu) for all of us!

In this season of holding on and letting go, what are we grasping that keeps us from the party? Are we gripping our independence? Our sense of entitlement? Our self-righteousness? God calls us to let it all go and pick up a fork and spoon. Let's party.