

## **The Prodigal Son**

*preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on March 31, 2019*

Luke 15:11-32

Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. 12 The 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. 13 A 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. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But 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! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” 20 So 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. 21 Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” 22 But 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. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for 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. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But 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. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” 31 Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But 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.” ’

In today’s gospel reading, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” we are reminded in a powerful way of God’s love for us and what God is willing to sacrifice in order to be reconciled with his estranged children. While much of this is lost on the contemporary western reader due to our unfamiliarity with first century Jewish culture, a brief examination of the times and customs of the day can easily

resurrect the full scandal of the parable we have just read, as well as the message of hope that it brings; in addition to the implications that it has for our lives.

So let us begin our quest to understand this parable by considering that in Jesus' day, most people were rural farmers, like the family in the parable. This meant that their land was their livelihood. Furthermore, the land that people owned was inherited and had been passed down from generation to generation for hundreds of years. In other words, the land was not a commodity for wheeling and dealing. The land was sacred.

Equally important to the people of that day were their families and neighbours upon whom they depended for everything. While our communities out here still have a lingering sense of being a tightly knit family where everybody is related to everybody, back then it was a reality taken to a level we cannot imagine. As a result, in Jesus' time, an individual had no identity apart from their family and their community. Unlike today where a person is primarily identified by their occupation and their accomplishments, in Jesus' day, a person could not be understood apart from the people to whom they were related.

Furthermore, in those days, great honour was bestowed upon the patriarch of a clan, and there was an elaborate code for keeping that honour in place. As part of this code, patriarchs did not run nor did they leave their places at the heads of their tables when guests were present. Also, patriarchs did not plead with their children; they told their children what to do.

Turning to the parable itself, it begins with the younger son asking the father for his inheritance. In those days, that would have been interpreted as the younger son telling his father, "I wish you were dead." This was definitely not the way good Jewish boys were taught to speak to their fathers.

Equally offensive to the hearers of the day is the fact that the father actually gave the younger son his inheritance rather than taking the insolent boy back to the woodshed to teach him a lesson. After all, what kind of parent would let his child get away with such despicable behavior? What kind of man would shame his community with such a demonstration of indecency? In the culture of the day, not only was such an action unthinkable, but, to even to tell such a story, like Jesus did, would be considered utterly distasteful.

However, if this was not bad enough, the parable becomes even more outrageous. As Jesus' narrates, the younger son abandons his parents, his family, and his community, disassociating himself from them and disassociating himself from their religion and their God. Turning his back on all that is good and right, he goes off to live as a stranger among the heathen, destroying his family's name and

wasting the family's livelihood with Gentile prostitutes. Then, once he has wasted all his money, the younger son becomes a pig farmer in order to survive. As you know, pigs are unclean animals in the Jewish faith and to be a pig farmer is an absolute abomination.

At this point in the story the younger son comes to his senses and decides to return to his father's house. While most sermons on the Prodigal Son focus on his decision to return home, his words of repentance, and his father's forgiveness, it is really the actions of the father that deserve the most attention in this story.

Already he has acted in a very unorthodox manner, allowing his son to curse him, divide the family farm and to sell a portion of the land. Then, when his younger son is approaching home, he does not disown him as the custom of the day mandated that he do. Instead, he ran out to meet him. By doing so he heaped further indignity upon himself by failing to walk like a patriarch and by revealing his ankles as he pulled up his robe to run.

Then, when he reaches the younger son, he embraces him, even before he has given his apology. Then he turns to his slaves and tells them to bring his son the best robe in the house (which would be his own robe), to put a ring on his finger (probably a signet ring) and sandals on his feet (only slaves go barefoot). Next he orders his servants to kill the fatted calf—not a goat, or a lamb, or a dozen chickens, but a calf—a clear sign that the celebration about to take place is not a quiet family affair but a feast of roast veal for the entire village. It is a feast to restore the family's honour, as well as a feast to restore the family's son. It is a banquet of reconciliation for anyone who will come.

While the community is celebrating, the elder son returns home and asks what is going on. When he hears what has happened, he is furious and he refuses to come in the house. By doing this, the older son is publicly repudiating his father's action, and the father's honour is assaulted one more time. However, the father is not concerned about maintaining his honour, he is concerned about having his family reconciled. Therefore, he humbles himself, yet again, as he leaves the head of the table, (which went against Jewish custom) and pleads with his elder son to come in.

Putting all this together, we can see through this parable that God's longing is for reconciliation within his broken family. In order to achieve this agenda, God is not willing to use his rightful authority to force his will upon us, but waits patiently for us to recognize and embrace his agenda as our own.

That being said, God is willing to sacrifice everything that he has in order to achieve his purpose of reconciliation. As described by the actions of the father in

the parable, God is willing to bring great shame and condemnation upon himself in order to unite his children in one family under one roof. As further proof of this truth, in a few short weeks, Jesus would live out this parable as he took the shame and condemnation of all God's children upon himself, as he bore the weight of our sins while on the cross. By doing so, Jesus demonstrated in the fullest measure the great lengths that God will go to in order to achieve his goal of reconciliation.

The implication of all this is that if we are to follow in Jesus' footsteps, we must realize that we have been called to a mission of reconciliation. Like Jesus, we have been sent into this world to offer ourselves as living sacrifices so that God's children may be brought together as one family under one roof, living in peace.

While this may seem like a joyous and effortless calling, it comes with a great cost. Just think of all it cost the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. He was required to give up land, money, family, and honour. He had to endure heartache, misunderstanding, and conflict; both within his family and within the community at large. He had to give up his right to insist on his way. He had to surrender everything. This was the cost of being an agent of reconciliation.

Likewise, we can expect to pay a similar price if we are to follow in our Master's footsteps and be agents of reconciliation in our churches, families, communities, and in our world. It won't be easy. That is why Jesus tells us in Luke chapter fourteen, right before he tells the three parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son, that we are to count the cost of being a disciple.

That being said, at the end of the day, our hope for reconciliation lies in the hands of the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety nine to find the lost sheep. Our hope lies in the hands of the God who sweeps the house carefully until he finds the lost coin. Our hope lies in the hands of our Father God, who will suffer great loss in order to unify His broken family. This is our hope. This is God's promise.

So with these words of hope and promise, let us begin another week in this sacred season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, recognizing God's reconciling presence in our midst, and participating in the unity that He is building. In this season of Lent, as we journey with Christ towards the cross, let us count the cost of discipleship and offer ourselves as living sacrifices on the altar of peace and reconciliation.