

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church  
The Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 14, 2010  
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

Of the thousands of books that Debby and I own, my favorite by far, is the dictionary. And my favorite of all dictionaries, is the unabridged Oxford Dictionary of the English language. It comes in 26 volumes, but some years ago I was fortunate enough to find and buy a two volume set that contains all the information of the 26 volume set, but in very, very, very small print, so small in fact, that it is virtually illegible without a magnifying glass.

That said, I turned to the dictionary, once again, to look up the word prodigal. The gospel we have before us this morning is one of the most beloved and most well-known of all of Jesus parables and therefore one of the most difficult to unwrap because everyone has formed their own opinion about what it means, and that includes me.

And so to look for something new, or something different or some kind of “aha” was my goal for this sermon.

So I went to the dictionary, not because I didn’t know what prodigal meant, but because I was certain it meant more than I knew. And I was right.

Of course, I found the words I was looking for and the words I expected to be there: wasteful, squandering, reckless, wanton, profligate, immoderate, improvident, intemperate. These words adequately and accurately describe the son in our story who asks his father for the portion of what would eventually become his inheritance and leaves home.

In my other reading for this sermon, one of those who commented on this text reminded his readers that the action of the younger brother in asking for his inheritance before his father died, did what NO ONE in his day and age would have ever done. For in asking for his share of his father’s property, not only would he be putting his own family’s wellbeing at risk, but those of the entire village who depended upon the employment and the generosity of the landowner, whose profligate son, just sold his portion to someone who presumably, would not have cared for the land or the tenants who worked it. In our day, it would be as if the largest landowner in beautiful downtown East Aurora, or quaint Orchard Park, gave a third of his property to his son who in turn, promptly sold it to Wal-Mart so that they could build a super Super Wally where the town square once stood. So, in many ways, the son was not the only prodigal one in this story, so too the father, who recklessly gave his sons their inheritance before its time. Note also, that the other brother, the one who later complains, was also given his inheritance early, which changed my opinion of that lad as well.

So Luke tells us that that is what happened. But now out on his own, the younger son blows through his money like a drunken sailor on shore leave and finds himself an indentured servant in a far country, hungry, tired, and angered at himself. The text tells us, “But when he came to himself,” which implies some sort of spiritual awakening, but in reality, I think it was his

stomach that spoke to him the loudest, because the text reads, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!”

I don’t like this kid at all, which is why I can’t even give him the benefit of the doubt when the text tells us that he has to “practice” the speech he’s going to give to his father, “Father I have sinned against heaven and before you I am no longer worthy to be treated as your son, treat me as one of your hired hands (who still have food to eat and to spare...I think he’s only thinking of his stomach, like I said I don’t like this kid much.)

So he heads off toward home, and as soon as he comes within eyesight of home, his father spots him, and here is where the true purpose of the parable comes forth, “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion and ran to him, and puts his arms around him,” and as the King James Version so lovingly portrays, “falls on his neck, kissing him.”

There’s the difference between the father in this story and me. I think if my errant child, who just blew a third of my estate on questionable goods and services, came crawling home, I suspect there’d be a whole lot more staring and talking and a whole lot less running and hugging.

Which is where the other half of the definition comes into play. I told you before, not only can the son be called prodigal, but so also the father. The son is reckless, profligate, squandering, excessive wanton, and so is the father, especially when he agrees to give his estate away, but here is where the other definition of prodigal comes into play. The OED also defines prodigal with these words: extravagant, lavish, bountiful, unstinting, unsparing. The story talks about the reckless son, but in the end it is a story about an extravagant Father, whose love knows no bounds. His is a lavish, bountiful, unsparing love, that he lavishes on BOTH his children.

I said before I didn’t like the young boy, but in a way, I like the elder boy even less. You’ll recall, he accepted his inheritance early too, and never said a word. At least he stayed home to help, but his words to his Father are just as disrespectful if not worse, because they reveal how he truly feels, “Listen,” I can just imagine starting off a conversation to my father like that, “Listen here, Daddy O.” it wouldn’t have gone well. “Listen,” he says, “I have been your slave all these years, and not once have you thanked me any gesture whatsoever, I didn’t expect the fatted calf, but it would have been nice if when my friends came around, you threw me a bone from time to time. But yet when this son of yours comes crawling back with his tail between his legs, you treat him like the best things since sliced bread.”

Talk about your unresolved anger. But here again, the story isn’t about the two boys, it’s about the Father. And once again, we’re given a glimpse of what it means to be prodigal in the good sense. The Father speaks, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life, he was lost, and now is found.”

Like I said, I don’t like either boy, and that’s the point. The occasion for the parable was because the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling about the fact that Jesus seemed to attract the wrong company, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” It’s not right, that an upstanding citizen, no less a learned rabbi, wastes his time and energy on the likes of those.

So Jesus tells the parable.

He tells the parable to illustrate something about God and tells the story in such a way that you can't stand either boy, and yet the Father loves them. And the reason you can't stand either boy, is because there's a little of each in all of us. Our disrespect may not have been so blatant, our selfishness not so obvious, our proclivity to care for ourselves first without consideration for others not as pronounced, but it was there, still is sometimes.

The Pharisees and the scribes were near sighted too. And so the Father has to run to make a point, has to correct the language so that this "son of yours" becomes once again, "your brother," and puts the best robe on our shoulders, the family signet ring on our hand, opens the vintage Champaign he's been keeping for just such an occasion and allows his most cherished one to be killed so that we might have life and have it abundantly.

**That's** the kind of Father we have.  
Amen.