

***Prodigals All***  
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***March 14, 2010 Lent 4C***  
***Based on Luke 15***

I must begin with a confession: I didn't write this sermon. You might accuse me of starting my vacation early. But the truth of the matter is, a pastor friend of mine forwarded me this sermon he wrote and it blew me away. It is one of the best sermons I have ever heard on the Prodigal Son story. And so how can I not share it with you?

It's entitled, "Prodigals All."

The following is a true story; it happened only last week. It involves my brother, two years younger than I. I watched him get off the airplane in Springfield, Missouri with his usual bouncy stride and wearing a comfortable plaid shirt. I had arrived only an hour earlier. His hair was short, curly, and brown as before; his smile still a little crooked and his sense of humor just the same as mine.

It was just like the old days, except that I had not seen him in ten years. I sized him up carefully. Unfair, I thought, that I had gotten heavier, greyer, balder and he had not. Things always went better for him than for me. My dad stood beside me and greeted his errant son as if the ten years had never happened. They hugged; my brother told my dad how glad he was to come home for a visit. Dad seemed to welcome him with a warmth that passed my understanding.

For the ten years my brother was away, he had been a member of a cult. A utopian, new age cult that formed a mini-society of thirty people who organized in a tribal model of shared land, shared income, shared marriage, shared children, and rule under a tribal council headed by a chieftain – an older man who directed the cult's formulation and direction.

The cult had a dark side. It believed that all the old loyalties to family, church, community, and society had to be renounced. So for ten years we were subjected to harassing phone calls, taunting letters, as well as suspicions of brain washing, terroristic activity, and international cloak-and-dagger stuff in countries that we knew my brother was visiting.

At one point the cult had been stormed by the CIA and FBI; at another they had been arrested on suspicion of child abuse. All such charges were subsequently dropped.

The worst of it was the demoralization of my parents – their nightmares, their attempts to have the group investigated, their confrontations with group members, and the way their health deteriorated with each ugly salvo from the cult. They grew older and weaker with each encounter.

My Prodigal brother had come home. He and my mother cried as they embraced. He doted over her as she ate her mushy nursing-home food. He pushed her wheelchair around the home on a tour. He helped her to the bathroom. He talked openly and honestly about his ten years, answering all questions and telling how he had now left the cult, having finally understood its dark side.

He brought pictures of the children of the group and the one particular child he is now raising. He cooked Dad's breakfast; fixed Dad's toilet; cleaned up Dad's attic – all a way of saying "I'm sorry. I'm home. I am a part of you again."

I asked him at one point, "Why have you come home?" After only a little thought he said, "To clean up the mess that I made."

Reconciliation, I found, makes me cry. The ten years melted away after ten minutes of reunion. I needed only to hear his apology and to see him and my parents talking to feel relief and thanksgiving. It was an answer to prayer; the impossible suddenly possible. God reconciling the world to himself right before my eyes.

At least, at first. Thirty-six hours into the visit I wasn't so certain. I was the elder brother in my father's house seeing the fatted calf I raised be offered to him. Lo these many years I had been steadfast and faithful helping my parents through each of their trials, crying with them, soothing their fears, helping to manage mom's illness. But now this scoundrel – my brother who always had the love and admiration of my parents – was in the spotlight. He was the center of attention. No matter what the conversation, it always revolved around him.

His vile deeds were discussed as "adventures"; my father seemed terribly reluctant to say anything confrontational. My brother's inexcusable behavior was instantaneously excused.

At breakfast the day I was to leave, I requested some time to talk privately with my brother, but somehow that never happened. I wanted him to know what it had been like for ten years to be on the receiving end of his cult experiment. I wanted him to hear about the anguish and the anger, the fear and the franticness we endured. I wanted him to pay an emotional price for the past just as we had. I wanted him to hurt so that my hurt could be eased. By the time I flew home at the end of the three day visit, I felt demoted and my agenda derailed. I didn't like the way I felt.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the father says to his oldest son, "Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!" (*Luke 15:31-32*)

Three points worth pondering:

First, we often pray for peace, for reconciliation, for new life to rise from the ashes of the old life with which we struggle. Peace, we make ourselves believe, is something that will magically descend upon us and envelop us as a gift of God, requiring nothing of us. But you and I should be aware that peace comes only at the price of sacrifice. Peace does not generally just come to us; we must be willing to work our way toward it. Reconciliation requires change from the offender, yes, but it also requires change in the one who is offended. Pray, indeed, for reconciliation and peace, but be prepared to give up self for its sake.

Second, we often laud faithfulness, steadfastness, and obedience as marks of a faithful Christian. We take pride in doing rightly what is right, for this is the character of a godly person. And so it is. But let us never forget that obedience is its own reward; to expect something more from our faithfulness to Christ – like a precious jewel in one’s heavenly crown one day or the particular attentions of a parent – is to turn obedience into a justifying work that neglects the fact that only Christ justifies us – whether we be the prodigal child or the elder sibling or the gracious parent.

Third, we confess our sin to God, asking that sin be forgiven and a renewal of life be granted. We wait each Sunday to hear the reassuring words of absolution and grace to be spoken over our struggle. We are comfortable being the confessee, but what about the confessor – the one to whom another comes seeking reassurance and the lifting power of grace?

It seems all too human to want my absolution to be granted without price, but yours at a great cost. Are we willing to accept forgiveness on Christ’s terms? Are we willing to graciously offer to another what Christ has offered to us? Christ calls us to be reconciled to one another, to be willing to pay the price of selflessness to make reconciliation happen.

Christ calls us to be obedient in all things, for it is right and good. But let us never demand anything from that obedience except the personal satisfaction of having done in deed what we believe in faith.

Christ calls us to forgive sin, beginning with our own, so that we will know firsthand the gift of grace that each and all long to discover.

What are we, any of us, but prodigal children doing the best we can as we make our way home?

Amen.