

From Exceptionalism to Inclusion or Will the Real Prodigal Please Stand Up?

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman

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15Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3So he told them this parable:

11Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12The 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. 13A 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. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17But 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! 18I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' 20So 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. 21Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22But 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. 23And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24for 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. 26He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29But 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. 30But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 31Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32But 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.'"

When I was 15 I started to rebel against my parents. I thought they were too strict, so I pushed against their boundaries. One hot, July night I went out with some friends. They didn't want me to go, but I did anyway.

We didn't do anything really bad. We were just boys being boys, a little ornery. Both my friends were older than me. Lynn, the one who was driving that evening, had a nice, late model convertible Chevy. At one point he started driving at a high rate of speed. I told him, "Lynn, you're not going to make this corner." I knew the road very well; it was the very road I lived on.

We had to go across one of those old-fashioned, one-lane bridges with stone walls on the approaches and steel barriers on the sides. Lynn lost control of the car, which attempted to go

through the bridge sideways. On the far side we hit the stone wall and then crashed into a large, oak tree. This was long before seatbelts. All three of us were projected out of the car. Although I don't remember it, I apparently went through the oak tree, landed on a barb wire fence and rolled into a meadow where cows were grazing.

When my parents were called to the scene, I told them that I was sorry for the trouble I had caused them. I have no idea how much anguish they experienced seeing me lying there in the field. I also told God I wanted to turn my life around.

I'm here this morning by the grace of God. I might well have been killed. Moreover, that experience was an inflection point in my life. I found a different path forward than the one I had been on. I attribute my involvement in a variety of ministries throughout my life to that accident.

Luke 15 is one of the most precious chapters in the whole Bible, the so-called lost and found chapter. Three different items were lost; each was found; and once found, there was great rejoicing and celebration. Notice how the anti was upped with each item: one out of 100 sheep, 1 out of 10 silver coins, 1 out of 2 brothers. Not only was the ratio increased with each episode, that which was lost was more precious: a silver coin was worth more than a sheep, a son was immeasurably worth more than a silver coin, not just in monetary value but in emotional worth.

Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament, says, "It is relatively easy to pick up a lost sheep or coin; making a lost child feel loved, feel counted, is infinitely more difficult, and infinitely more important" (*The Jewish Annotated New Testament*). True, how very true.

It is said that there are but two human stories: (1) a person gets restless, leaves home and heads off to a far country; (2) having come to his/her senses or become homesick, a person heads back home. The one story is about journey, about leaving one's past behind, as if we can really do that; the other story is about homecoming, trying to reconnect with and make peace with one's past. If this is true that there are but two human stories told over and over, then the story of the Prodigal Son is an arch-typical human story that embraces both the going away and the coming home.

Here's a parenthetical comment. I think most of us realize how important naming is. We call this the parable of the Prodigal Son. Some call it the parable of the Forgiving father. It could be called the parable of the Resentful, Older Brother. Amy-Jill Levine says it should be called "The parable of the absent mother." Good point. Where is the mother in the story? Did these two brothers not have any sisters?

Maren Tiribassi, a UCC pastor, often writes prose poems based on lectionary texts. This week she wrote a poem that addressed this question about an absent mother, called "The mother's side of the conversation." The premise of the poem is that the mother was the one who had to push her husband out of the house to go welcome the returning son. It ends this way: "don't forget the ring! / I'm going to the kitchen. / Trust me, his brother will get over it."

Here are my questions: Who is the real prodigal? Will the real prodigal please stand up?!

The rebellious young son? He wanted to set out on his own, but to do that he needed his inheritance. Asking for his inheritance was as good as wishing his father were dead, because people don't usually get their inheritance until after their parents are gone. This act on his part would have brought shame on his family. Surely, he was the prodigal son, as we traditionally assume.

What about the permissive father? Don't you think the father was a bit prodigal in granting his son's wish, and then welcoming him back into the family without any demands on his younger son and, moreover, throwing a big party for him. Fathers in Near-eastern culture would have responded very differently to this brash demand on the part of the son. Typically, the father would hit the son on the side of the head and told him to get back to work, and that would have been the end of it. Wasn't this father more than a bit permissive? Wasn't he a little prodigal himself? And what's with that party? Sounds like cheap grace to me.

What about the jealous, dutiful, stay-at-home older brother? Wasn't he a bit prodigal too? He was jealous of his father's benevolent treatment of his errant younger brother to the point he wouldn't come in and join the party. Notice his choice of words in his accusation against his father: *that younger son of yours*.... He refused to name his father or his brother in the accusation. He was keeping himself at arm's length from them. He no longer felt at home in his own home. In the end, the older, jealous brother was the one who cut himself off from his family. Sounds prodigal to me!

Here's another question for you: With which of these characters do you identify? Probably at different times in our lives it's one or another.

I talked about how my parents' boundaries chafed for me and I rebelled against them. Well, what goes around, comes around. Some years later my son felt he had to rebel against my standards for him. Once we had a discussion about my parenting style. I told him, "You know I set boundaries for you because I love you and care about you?" To which he delivered a stinger: "Sometimes I think you love me too much." WOW! Love can devolve into control, taking away the agency of another person that is beloved of God.

No matter which of these characters we most identify with, here are some questions for each:

The prodigal son: "What happens when I leave behind unconditional acceptance and go seeking love elsewhere? What happens when I look for meaning and purpose in life apart from God and God's family?"

The father: "What will I need to let go of in order to become the welcoming parent? What keeps me from giving compassion to all the wounded prodigals who wonder into my life?"

Elder son: "Why do I feel better than others and resentful toward people who I think are beneath me? Are there ways I feel I've not been recognized or gotten what I deserve? What is keeping me from partying with God's community of forgiven sinners?"

Here is a maxim I've gleaned from the gospels, from Jesus' teaching and his example: **The ones who are most aware of their own need for grace are the ones who are most ready to extend grace and forgiveness to others. But ironically, the ones who are not ready to extend mercy and forgiveness to others are the most needy ones—because they don't recognize their own need for God's grace.**

Think about that other parable of Jesus, the one about the Pharisee and the tax collector going up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee said: "I'm glad I'm not like this sinner." The tax collector beat his chest and said: "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus said, "This self-acknowledged sinner is more justified than the one who boasted of his own righteousness."

I have said there are but two human stories, one about leave taking, the other about coming home. Actually, there is another human story told over and over. This often the sub-plot to the other story: it's about conflict and dysfunction in families.

If you want a textbook case of family dysfunction—cases, actually—read the book of Genesis. Oh, my: Cain killed Abel. Jacob and Esau had a feud due to Jacob's trickery in stealing Esau's birthright, aided and abetted by his mother. Joseph's brothers were jealous of him and they nearly had him killed and they sold him into slavery.

Families are complicated. Some families are more complicated than other families. Some families are really, really complicated. Alienation between parent and child can be one of the most anguishing of all human experiences.

It can be gut-wrenching when our children disappoint us: if they don't turn out the way we had hoped; if they don't accept our values; if they reject our faith, perhaps the most difficult of all. My responses:

- All the returns aren't in yet. We can hope and pray our wayward children will turn their lives around and "come home."
- Sometimes all we can do is pray for them. The serenity prayer might be helpful: *God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and Wisdom to know the difference.*
- We can love them unconditionally, no matter what choices they make, regardless of walls of alienation between them and us.
- We parents need grace as much as our children. We can bring up our children in the way we think they should go. But they enter a very complicated and enticing world. They can choose paths different from the one we started them on. They have their own agency. We parents sometimes have to cut ourselves some slack, no matter how hard that may be.

Helen Alderfer, a friend of mine of blessed memory, said to me once: "No matter how old we get as parents or how old our children are, we are still their parents." True, but the nature of that relationship needs to change over time. We need to give our children space and freedom to chart their own journey.

It is said that on his deathbed the Russian writer Dostoevsky gathered his family around him and he had someone read the story of the Prodigal Son. Then he said, "This is the only story!"

Here are my concluding questions: where do we find ourselves in this story? Where is God in our story? Where is grace?