

JOSHUA 5:9-12

PSALM 32

II CORINTHIANS 5:16-21

LUKE 15:1-3, 11b-32

Fourth Sunday in Lent; Laetare

March 27, 2022; Year C

Would the Real Prodigal Please Stand?

Prodigal! Prodigal! Prodigal this! Prodigal that! Here a prodigal! There a prodigal! Everywhere, a prodigal! Everywhere you look! Will the real prodigal please stand . . . up? I am sure that many of you remember two game shows from back in the day, “What’s My line?” and “To Tell the Truth.” Each of these highly rated shows were designed to reveal the occupation or identity of a mystery guest. Describing “What’s My Line?”, some have said that it was not only a great game show, “but one of the best television shows ever.” On a website called “Stuff Nobody Cares About,” the writer cites a source called *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows 1948—Present* by Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh (Ballantine 1988), a guide they call “an indispensable television reference book.” They say, “What’s My Line was the longest-running game show in the history of prime-time network television. It ran for 18 seasons, on alternate weeks from February to September 1950, then every Sunday at 10:30 p.m. for the next 17 years. The format was exceedingly simple. Contestants were asked simple yes-or-no questions by the panel members, who tried to determine what interesting or unusual occupation the contestant had. Each time the contestant could answer no to a question, he got \$5, and a total of 10 no’s ended the game. The panel was forced to don blindfolds for the ‘mystery guest,’ a celebrity who tried to avoid identification by disguising his voice.” **The other popular gameshow was “To Tell the Truth.” “To Tell the Truth” was a program consisting of three panelists with bags placed over their heads, all portrayed as the same person. Contestants were tasked with asking questions of the trio in the hope of figuring out who was telling the truth about her**

or his identity as well as discovering, revealing, who the imposters were. The questioning would intensify, with the panelists giving deceptive answers to confuse their interrogators, to throw them off the scent. Finally, after all this inquisition, the host would declare that now infamous line, “Would the real_____ please stand up!” Usually, the contestants inevitably got it wrong!

As we read the parable of the prodigal, routinely called the Prodigal Son, along with the Good Samaritan, the two most popular parables in Luke’s Gospel and all the Bible, we can also raise with conviction the question, inquiring, “Would the real prodigal please stand up?” For all is not as it seems, all is not as it appears, when we look at the three main characters, a father and his two beloved sons described in this mythic tale, a story of epic proportions. So, let’s revisit, taking a another and perhaps deeper look at the parable called the prodigal, remembering that all the familiar titles attached to these object lessons have been added and were never original with these legendary narratives. As is often the case in my preaching and teaching, ancient Near Eastern hospitality is at the heart of the implied and explicit lesson the writer sought to convey. **We join on the journey with the young son to a far-flung field where he spent his inheritance on prostitutes and riotous living. The rest of it he wasted!**

A part of the trilogy of short stories known as the lost and found parables and evidently meant to be read together as a whole unit, the parable of the prodigal is a rich narrative containing deeply layered meaning. No doubt, like all the parables, this was a familiar old, old, story, nothing new, not unique to Jesus nor original with his teaching and preaching, but one of numerous didactic stories long circulated, all designed to provide the great lessons of life, offering sage wisdom developed from days of yore and shared amongst the ancient cultures of the Near East, what we routinely call the Middle East today. Any rabbi worth his salt, would know these lessons well, ready to bring

them out of moth balls and use them when the right moment came. Storytelling is a wonderful craft, a delightful artform, the weaver of tales having the innate ability to create a visual tapestry that takes the hearer to a specific time and place, a particular context, making the characters in the story come to life. It is something that comes natural for us Southerners as we tell our tales, full of fact, fantasy, fabrication, and outright fiction and all stirred together with a little humor, along with a little colloquial wit and wisdom. Yes, we embellish and exaggerate to the point that to call some stuff a “white lie” just does not get the job done! That is what makes the Blue-Collar Comedy Tour so appealing. And yes, it is part of the method to the madness of my preaching. I have never met an adjective or an alliteration I didn’t like! But I digress; I often do!

You know the simple setting for the story, as with all parables a very easy-to-follow plot line, in this dramatical biblical rendition we might call an ancient version of “My Two Sons,” staying with our 60s TV theme for a moment. Rest in peace Fred McMurry! The older son is a veritable Boy Scout, gentle, courteous, kind, thrifty, loyal, including all the rest of these adjectives describing the best character. He was devoted to his doting father, totally committed to the family homestead, never causing a ruckus, never rocking the boat, a stand-up, sit-down kind of guy. He never, not even once, upset the family system, never causing trouble, never challenging authority or tradition. He was all about process and protocols, obeying the rules and regulations. He always kept good boundaries, always staying in the proper lanes, coloring in the lines, reliable in every way like an old shoe. He probably was an old soul, as we say! The younger son, not so much! This young whippersnapper, however, was an eager beaver, a restless sort, his impatient eye always on the prize, the world he anticipated and hoped for oyster, but always out of reach, beyond his grasp. This large parcel of land, a whole lot of acreage—you could roam all day—was ironically very stifling, extremely suffocating like a

straitjacket. Yes, the confines of the ranch were as large as the eye could see yet seemed so very small in his not-so-humble estimation. He was always looking over his shoulder to what was seeking to fence him in, while looking ahead to see whatever it was that might be over the horizon. This young firebrand was never satisfied, always driven. No doubt he was very intuitive, an intellectually curious sort. And he was extremely bored, frustrated with the mundane, the ordinary routine that had become his play-it-again-Sam lot in life. He saw no way out of his dilemma, a conundrum from which he believed there was no escape. No, he truly believed in his head and his heart that if he stayed stuck on the farm, listening to his old man, as Elton John sings, he would wither and die right there, his predicament surely causing him to rot on the vine, enduring a slow and agonizing death, wasting away as he toiled day after day in the hot sun, a tan line of red around his neck that had the odd appearance like that of a hangman's noose.

This young explorer had to get out of this place (Billy Joel, "Piano Man") if he was to survive, and so one night he plotted his getaway, a ticket to paradise and paradox—thank you and shout out to singers Eddie Money and Michael McCloud for those somewhat subtle images—anticipating with dread the emotionally charged conversation he would have to have with the old man, his aging, caring, and loving dad. Yes, someone who would need the tender care of assisted living in his not-so-distant elder years. Not on this youngest son's watch! This coerced, yes, completely forced, rite of passage was not going to be easy, a serrated not a smooth-edged cut, but it was the only way he would ever mature into a functioning adult, becoming the man he always wanted to be and believed he could be. As he tossed and turned in the longest night of his life, wrestling like Jacob by the Jabbok River in Genesis (32-22-32) once upon a time, filled to the brim, overflowing with all his thoughts and a flood of emotions, enduring what we might call the dark night of the soul. Morning would never come soon

enough, but of course it eventually did. He was now raring to go, ready to engage what he prayed would not be too hard, not as difficult as he just knew would be the case, his worst imagination getting the best of his plans and preparations. He feared being thrown a last-minute curve ball, change in plans, plot twist, the proverbial parental roadblock, an obstacle standing in his hellbent way. Please, no guilt! No, second guessing! But lots of questions! The conversation went far more easily, much smoother, than this restless youngster ever imagined, his father acquiescing and giving him his share of the inheritance if not his blessing. Surely, dad saw the signs and dad saw it coming, totally prepared! By the way, a subtly somewhat hidden in the story, the older son got his windfall as well, funds dispersed into his savings account.

And off to the far country the young green lad went, full of unbridled energy, enthusiasm, excitement and anticipation. The far country— what an amazing metaphor for all life’s adventures, the consummate reality of our good, bad, and ugly. Little did he know, but this younger prodigal would be going whole hog in this soon-to-be-aborted adventure of a lifetime. I couldn’t resist! I can see this boy-hoping-to-become-a-man wide and wild eyed, bushy-tailed, as he skipped along his unknown highway, not knowing even in the least, like Abraham of yore, as the Father of the Faithful set out on his voyage to nowhere and any and everywhere, as he departed from his ancestral home in Ur of the Chaldees. The young adventurer, a pilgrim in training, was clueless, not even caring what frontiers the mystery road might lead, taking him to exotic places unknown. Yes, I am reminded of Robert Frost’s beautiful poem, “Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood!” And as Yogi Berra was once purported to have said, “If you come to a fork in the road, take it!” The young lad took it with gusto but not in stride, and oh how things quickly took a turn for the worst as he quickly squandered his last dime, his too-easily-attained financial windfall. The school of hard knocks came knocking and knocked him on his keester!

And here we find him, a ritually pure child of Israelite heritage, all out of dough and now reduced to feeding pigs, working for the man in a pigsty, laboring for a gentile man of all low lifes, never before really having had to work a day in his life, always living in his brother's huge but protective shadow. Yes, swine, the quintessential non-Kosher, unclean animal, a symbol of the most horrific dietary options. Oh, the embarrassment, the humiliation! Just ask the apostle Peter in that sheet-come-down dream sequence we read in the Book of Acts, a sheet full of every non-Kosher morsal imaginable, all of them crawling around in a grotesquely divine and demonic dance, the difference making for a confusing, confounding, conundrum! Common! Filth! Nasty! Pardon the pun, but this once wild boar of a young man was now a shadow of his former self, now starving for affection and food, famished to the point that he would gladly eat the husks the pigs were devouring, fantasizing about their gourmet smorgasbord, a buffet of the grossest gruel, perhaps the pathetic, pitiful, child even beginning to think that some bacon or ham, the whole hog, would be pretty good right about now. Barbecue? How about a little pulled pork? Yum, the other white meat! Um, um, good! Sooie pig, as the Arkansas Razorbacks say! Come on! Go ahead! Just grab you a little snack of what you are tossing to these oinkers! When you reach a certain hunger point, a certain hunger threshold, any and everything looks mighty tasty! Our parents often opined that if you get hungry enough, you will eat what is put in front of you. As a very picky eater, I beg to differ and have oft proven that axiom just plain wrong.

And so, the young explorer begins to experience another dark night of the soul, this time in real time, fully awake, fully sober, having landed in a pig pen of all places, the perfect surroundings for a wakeup call. Coming to his senses and to himself, he begins to rehearse a most embarrassing, most humiliating, speech, part two, the sequel! Been there! Done that! Got the postcard! Still a smooth operator (Sade)! Yes, he fondly recalled that even the hired hands, the servants and

the slaves, fared better at his father's place, always plenty to eat, with a warm hearth and a warm bed with a dry roof over their head. Perhaps, he thought to himself, musing amidst the raw stench of the snorting pigs, in this dumpster fire that was now his miserable existence—some highlife he was living—surely if he would crawl back in a posture of utmost humility, groveling on hand and knee, willing to beg for mercy, that surely, quite possible, he would have the remotest chance to get some, if he were willing to plead to be one of his father's lowliest hires, maybe there would be a chance, the slightest chance, he would be allowed back in the not-so-good graces of the one who raised him to know better, to be better than his blatantly bad and bombastic behavior. Yes, a plan firmly in place, he leaves the far country and the pig pen behind! Oink! Oink! Yes, this younger son is surely the prodigal in the story! And we are just getting started! The story is about to get interesting! Plot twist!

Who knows how long the journey took back to what once was his ancestral home? What an emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual roller coaster ride this turned out to be, absolutely exhausting and not at all exhilarating. It was a long way from his home to his home-away-from-home in the outhouse of a Gentile of all people, and finally back again, never dreaming of familial restoration! For some strange reason the return trip seemed to take twice as long, each laborious step, each painful mile accentuating an exponentially bad memory, a feeling of dread accompanying his every labored step, his every move. After all, he had not eaten a good meal since he had spent his last coin! As if stranded on a deserted island, he had lost weight and strength, looking jaunt, no longer looking like the buff, strapping young, overconfident, cocky, stud now trapped in what to him had become an unknown, emaciated, body, not even a remote facsimile His sixpack farm boy abs were now nothing more than a distant memory, nowhere in sight. Even so, it was a great trade to say the least! And, despite this lengthy sojourn, literally and metaphorically,

the day of his arrival was getting closer and closer until he finally saw the big house off in the distance, fueling a rush of emotions, an overflowing of feelings driving his final steps, a sensory of overloaded circuits overwhelming him in every way, consuming him as he entered through the wide gate that seemed so suddenly narrow. Sounds like another biblical image! Suddenly I see visions of Tony Orlando and Dawn's epic song "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Around the Old Oak Tree!"

Suddenly, out of nowhere, actually out of the house, came the father, his father, daddy, running, leaping like a gazelle with joy, moving lovingly toward this once wayward son of his, reaching the disheveled boy, showering him with kisses and bear hugs, the deepest embrace, despite how grotesque his youngest, once missing in action son, looked and how putrid he smelled, an olfactory nightmare! Call it Pig Pen Number Five, a not-so-subtle olfactory sensation in every bottle! No retribution, no punishment, no "I told you so," no questions asked. We need some justice at this part of the story! Surely, this father is a prodigal, an enabler on steroids! Where is the accountability, a demand for an accounting and an apology? It is a scene as familiar and as rare as any we could anticipate. Modeling the ancient custom of hospitality, it is past time for the most elaborate party, an "extravagant welcome" home, complete with a fatted calf, the carnivore's symbol for not only the finest meal imaginable, but the most hospitable welcome. No invitation required! Sidebar: the scene replicates the cultural edict of ancient Near Eastern hospitality, first revealed in Genesis 18 in the story of Abraham and Sarah by the Oaks of Mamre as they extend a lavish welcome to the three mystery men disguised as angels, and/or vice versa. It is the initial hospitable event recorded in all the Bible, fatted calf included! All was now well with the son's return! Not! All was not happily ever after.

The older son comes in from the field carrying his own sordid smell, the odor of the fruits of his labors, a wonderful aroma, produced from

hard, grueling, work in the vineyard and whatever other fields demanded his constant, undivided attention. Long before he makes it to the big house, he hears music playing, shouts of joy, all kinds of racket and commotion, a festive feeling oozing from the mansion. Just, what gives? Perhaps, dad is finally throwing a party for his faithful and loyal son, the one who never questioned, never wavered or waffled, who never even gave a first thought about leaving for fortunes unknown. About damn time! Home is where the heart is! There is no place like home! Blah, blah, blah! Maybe dad is finally over the grief of losing his no account other, lesser son, surely not the favorite! As the elder, eldest, prepares to make his triumphal entry, he pulls aside an attending servant to inquire of what he surely already knows, just to make certain about his ill-founded assumptions, these wrongly perceived suspicions! Never assume anything! Nope! This party is for your ingrate younger brother who has returned in glory to receive all the blessings of his father as if nothing untoward ever happened. How unwarranted! Oh my! The father had put a robe on his back, desperately needed clean clothes, a ring on his finger, the sign that he was a fully vetted member of the household, in good standing, entitled to all the rights and privileges thereof, including a fatted calf to boot, the cherry to top it all off. Yes, the fatted calf was the crowning glory, the centerpiece of a sumptuous meal and an ancient and sure sign of celebration. Filet! Prime rib! Kobe, wagyu, beef! The older son is suddenly filled with rage, all these years of bowing and scraping now coming home to roost in an invective filled diatribe reduced in the parable to one profoundly poignant comment about the fact he had never been given a calf to enjoy with his friends, not even as much as a goat. Besides, a goat just will not do that for you! He had never disobeyed, while conveniently pointing out the litany of his brother's foibles, his squandering of property and all his loose women, and this was the thanks he reaped, no good deed going unpunished. Surely, this older brother is the prodigal in the parable. No words from daddy would

suffice, would take away the pain. The father's only tone-deaf response, his only recourse, to the righteously angry older brother was a justification of his actions, that what he was doing was what was required, even necessary, because the dead have come back to life, the lost are now found. We are never told if the older prodigal ever comes to the party. My unfortunate hunch is that he remained a royally pissed and proud pouter in the mold of Jonah back in the day. What a party pooper!

The beauty of this thing we call gospel Christianity is that it is not fair, that it is never fair! The least and the last are treated the same, given the same, extended an equity befitting an egalitarian philosophical lifestyle. It is never a matter of being worthy or unworthy, entitled or unentitled because all are made level at the cross, all find themselves on a level plane, invoking Isaiah's grand and gracious vision of the peaceable kingdom, all that lion and lamb analogy stuff, understood inclusively as the realm of God in Jesus' world and eternal view. What I love about the parable of the prodigal, better said I think, the parable of the prodigals, is that each participant, the father and his two sons, were all in need of redemptive resolution, yes, a spiritual solution as each were lost in their own way, desperately needing to be found. And yes, of course, that is not the pedestrian, traditional, way that this parable has been interpreted down through the centuries, employing a top-down theological premise, the shallow fallacy of getting saved. No, it is far deeper, simpler and more complex than that! For when any of the human creation experiences any level, any degree or form of lostness, God is lost as well, is as incomplete, as lacking, as non-whole as any of the human beings created *imago Dei*, in the divine image. Our relationship with God is horizontal, not vertical, or at least it should be. We trust that God is with us in every celebration and crisis, accompanying our every move in every moment, no matter the crucible of the most horrific situations, never far away or far removed, detached, recused from the

realities in which we live and move and have our being. We believe that God is both within and transcending the vastness of the universe, down to every part and parcel thereof, including the likes of you and me. God did not look away from Jesus as he hung on the cross as traditional substitutionary atonement purveyors claim but was with Jesus in every breath right up until and including his last, even as he expunged his final painful exhale. In the same way God is with us in our travails, our trials and tribulations, the temptations that seek to overwhelm and debilitate us, yes, to offer an example of our most graphic contemporary illustration, including the dynamics surrounding both Russians and Ukrainians, God loving them both equally. God is with us, no matter what side of the rightness ledger we find ourselves. Right or wrong does not matter in God's system of justification, an unbalanced scale where all are made just, no matter how the pendulum of fairness or evil or wickedness radically swings. Yes, that is how it is at the foot of the cross! The just will live by faith whether they have any or not! Yes, we are all prodigals! Yes, at the end of the day, in the final analysis, indeed we are all prodigals most if not all the time. God is a prodigal and a God of prodigals, indeed a prodigal God, for graciously loving every person, imbuing all of us with the peace and mercy that only comes from awe and wonder producing transcendent mystery that is revealed as a divine version of holy intervention, ever so subtle, yet ever so sure. Thanks be to God!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, a prodigal God who loves prodigal people, yes, including the likes of you and me! Amen and amen!

