

THE PRODIGAL'S PROGRESS – A 4th Sunday of Lent, Year C 2007 Sermon by Dan Stern
Broadview Community UCC; updating THE 3/21/04 *REAL* PRODIGAL on 3/18/07
(As I often do, I owe linguistic and inspirational credit to Rev. Grant Gallop of Managua,
Nicaragua)

It's been called the epic tale of Christianity. For 20 centuries, it has been considered the paragon of all parables. Literary critic Robert Bridges calls it "an absolutely flawless piece of work."

It's possible you're one of the people in this room who has never heard the Parable of the Prodigal before, or never thought all that much about it. Maybe some of you did see this week's Friday PI quiz to test one's overall knowledge of religion. I'm really embarrassed to have to tell you that I barely merited being characterized as 'ready for cocktail conversation'! In my defense, I have to say that I tried to take the quiz upon waking, before I'd finished my first cup of coffee. I can't think about much of anything before I've had at least my second cup! But it's also true that we can no longer assume widespread common cultural grounding in Western society's traditional 'public domain' faith stories. Cocktail conversation about religion aside, this particular prodigal parable is too profound not to be proclaimed to succeeding generations.

The parable of the prodigal, like faithful Christian life as a whole, is about journeying – The prodigal parable is really the story of a number of journeys: three of them by the younger son alone – one, his leaving home for a faraway place, two, his coming to himself in said faraway place, and three, his coming home. We should be able to identify____. We often say we're at different places along the way in our own faith journeys. We might also find we identify with one or more of the other characters in the prodigal parable plot line.

In literary history, this parable gets classified with a long line of heroic travel tales. Nearly a thousand years before Jesus, Homer told of his hero's journey in the *Odyssey*. Dante, from medieval Italy, journeyed through purgatory, the inferno, and paradise, and wrote his itinerary in the *Divine Comedy*. In more recent times, J. R. R. Tolkien writes of the journey of the Hobbit to find the Lost Ring, and Alex Haley writes of the pilgrimage of a people from Africa to Atlanta, and back, in his search for their 'roots'.

We can follow this heroic travel tale tradition yet further back and much closer to today. *For instance*: "2000 years before Jesus, somewhere 'between the rivers' of the Tigris and the Euphrates in ancient Mesopotamia – which is to say, modern-day Iraq – someone wrote down the tale of a traveler seeking everlasting life – it has come to be known as the Epic Gilgamesh. More tragic travel stories are being written in that same land today. Some of these...tell of how the children of Texas and of England went off to what was a distant country to them, and lost their way in this same ancient land between these same ancient rivers. Three years ago today in this sanctuary, we grieved and protested the end of a full year of war following the deceptive start of the invasion of Iraq. Now we're at the start of the fifth year of that epic fools errand – that trail of tears and tragedy – it's already been a longer war journey than the whole of WWII – and we're still grieving, still protesting. Here's what was said from this pulpit three years ago today: (Gallop paraphrase): "Modern parables ask how soon will Americans come to ourselves, as the prodigal son came to himself in Jesus' parable, and we'll collectively arise, leave Iraq, and go home to our Father, and say 'Father we have (all) sinned against heaven and before you, and are no longer worthy to be called your own children – no longer worthy to be called a merciful people of liberty and peace?'" Keep on praying for peace, keep on protesting war today and tomorrow – As M. L. King said, "We shall have to repent, not so much for the evil deeds of wicked

people, but for the appalling silence of good people." And what could possibly be more important in our collective faith journey than to take up the path of peace?

The parable says the younger son 'came to himself', but it's not only or even primarily the young foot soldiers in this war who have squandered their heritage. As Phil Oaks once sang of it, "It's always the old who send them off to war", and it's the old who should know better. An entire nation needs to 'come back to it's own best self' – it's not too late.

So do march. And whether you make it to the big marches downtown or not, travel prayerfully at home this week. Find in today's parable, a few prayer-suitable words and phrases to repeat to yourself over and over again this week. It's a technique called Centering Prayer – you could focus, for example, on the word "worthy"; the phrase "enough to spare"; "come to myself"; "the lost is found"; or "alive again". Let the word or phrase you choose from the story be your prayer. Let it bring you closer to God.

Another way to travel prayerfully this week: place yourself in the story; imagine yourself to be each of the personalities contained therein. It's quite likely that you've actually been each of the three characters at different times in your life. If we're honest, many of us likely identify with the older brother. We empathize with the one who has worked hardest and longest and stayed most tried and true. Sure, he's grown a bit bitter over the years, but we understand that too, don't we? He's endured backbreaking toil. He's never seen far lands; he's only heard romantic stories. In time, he starts to grow jealous of his brother's presumed freedom. He claims the adequately disowning him. The elder son exaggerates the younger one's misdemeanors; he furnishes felonies from his imagination. Ever so prim and proper, he presumes prostitutes, not pigs are his brother's daily companions. He, of course, would never soil self in sharing a trough with pigs or a bed with prostitutes. Nevertheless, he too has lost his way, not by being piggish, but by being priggish and prudish. He has put himself in a kind of sulking self-exile, his one arrogant advantage being that of having 'always done the right thing'. 'Your son!' he hisses at the Waiting Father who corrects him: 'Your Brother!' Then, with an angry stomp at the prospect of welcoming the other back: 'I will not go in to the party!' I am reminded of those leaders of certain religious denominations who so adamantly refuse to accept gay ministers and marriage. Some church leaders, ever the bitter elder brothers would sooner not eat the fatted calf, not celebrate, certainly not if the celebration happens to be a wedding party for a same-sex couple.

Many gay and lesbian Christians on the other hand, identify most with the younger brother; we don't think much of ourselves, we have internalized society's homophobia, and feel even as many of us are beginning to be welcomed back home that we are still in essence wandering, lost (black) sheep among the flock. Or maybe you were the one in your family of origin who rebelled the longest, who did the most drugs, who separated most completely from all things parental. Many of our truest religious leaders were once prodigal sons or daughters. Henri Nouwen once said, "It became painfully clear that leaving home was much closer to my spiritual experience than I had thought...". "Leaving home is," says Nouwen, "A denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being, that God holds me safe in an eternal embrace, that I am indeed carved in the palms of God's hands and hidden in their shadows. Leaving home means ignoring the truth that God has 'fashioned me in secret, molded me in the depths of the earth and knitted me together in my mothers' womb.' Leaving home is living as though I do not yet have a home and must look far and wide to find one."

Let it also be said that although one meaning of the word "prodigal" is to be "recklessly wasteful", "debauched" and "squandering", just as the younger son is portrayed, a second

more encompassing definition is to be “profuse in giving”, “exceedingly abundant” and “lavish”. The older son may have been profuse in doing his duty, but also lavish in long-simmering resentments. Perhaps he is also “prodigal” in his jealousy or his anger. But the latter definition of prodigality as profuseness, as lavishness could best be applied to the father! The father was profuse, lavish, and excessively inclined too. But the father’s prodigality, his lavish expenditure, was expressed in a most extravagant kind of tenderness, a generous degree of love and forgiveness, both for the dutiful, ever-present-by-his-side one and for the extravagantly squandering and wasteful one. Basically, all three characters in the story are prodigal ones: excessive and unrestrained in their character; one lavish in leaving that basic metaphorical place we call home; one lavish in losing what he clung to too tightly; and lastly, one lavish in love in forgiveness and returning. Which one is, in the best sense, prodigal? The prodigal papa, of course – the waiting, graciously permissive adult in the story, the generous, tenderhearted one. Let’s hear it for the prodigal papa.

Of course, none of the characters are “bad” and our world needs all three. “If the prodigal younger brother is to survive at all he will need some of the older brother’s discipline and devotion to duty. And if the prodigal older brother is to ever live a life worth living, he will need some of the younger brother’s brokenness and humility.”

But most of all, we all need to center our thoughts and prayers, on the more-generous way of the prodigal papa – the one who is prodigal in forgiveness and love. Toni Morrison once said that “The only grace we can have is the grace we can imagine. If we cannot see it, we cannot have it.”

Certainly the lavish, immediate kind of prodigality exhibited by the father in the story is rare, all too rare. He not only forgave the younger son promptly and extravagantly, he also met and loved the resentful elder son with much tender patience. But I hope some of you identify most with him. If we can do so honestly, we understand the divine nature; and we’re getting closest of all in our faith journey to God.

“When all who are prodigal in one way or another come to ourselves and turn our journey homeward, it is the Holy One’s love come running downstairs out of heaven to meet us in Jesus that welcomes us prodigals and pigs, inviting us all to the party planned for the Restoration and Refreshment of the whole Creation. The music and dancing have already begun. The robes are ready, the way home will be a ride home from our own funerals, on to the Feast of (Resurrection) Life. The truth of all human religion is here in the Prodigal’s Progress: It is fitting to make merry and be glad. We are alive again.” Amen!