

Fourth Sunday in Lent — March 31, 2019

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The word “prodigal” has both a positive and a negative connotation. It can mean to be lavish or extravagant in an irresponsible, wasteful way, like the younger son in today’s parable. But it can also mean to be lavish or extravagant in a generous way, which certainly describes the behavior of the father in the story. Even though we sometimes call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, I think it is more the Parable of the Prodigal Father, focusing on the lavish, extravagant—to the point of being unreasonable—love that the father has for his lost son.

This way of reading the parable makes sense to me because Jesus tells so many stories about the prodigal, extravagant love of God. In addition to the Parable of the Prodigal Father, he also tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan, who not only binds up the wounds of the injured traveler and gets him settled into an inn where he can rest and recover, but also promises to pay any and all expenses incurred in restoring him to health. Extravagant love, prodigal care for the broken.

Then there is the vineyard owner who pays the workers hired at the end of the day the very same wage as those hired first thing in the morning. Extravagant generosity.

The shepherd who leaves behind his flock of 99 and goes off to rescue the one sheep who has wandered away. Extravagant concern for the lost and vulnerable.

What can we conclude from Jesus telling these and many similar stories except that this must be how God operates, this must be how God is. God loves us with a prodigal, extravagant love beyond measure. God is a prodigal lover of humanity and of *all* that God has made, the whole creation.

Such extravagant love is a measure of how highly God appraises our worth. God loves us so prodigally because of how highly God values us. The supreme measure of our worth to God is the Son; that is, God’s willingness to come into the creation as the Son and to lay down God’s life for us. This is the greatest sign of how prodigally God loves us. And it’s shocking because it’s not the way any reasonable god would behave.

Such love is truly indescribable. We try, of course, because we must grasp for language to communicate it. We may say that this divine love is like the love of parent for child. Many of us parents say that we would sacrifice our own life for the sake of our own children. But God is willing to sacrifice God’s life for absolutely everyone, even those who reject God, even those

who are opposed to God, even those who willfully wander and stray. God is willing to die for them too.

And God is willing to lay down God's life not only for those creatures made in God's image and likeness—human creatures—but for all creatures great and small. God is willing to give God's life for the sake of all that God the Creator has brought to birth—plants and trees, rivers and oceans, sun and moon and distant galaxies. God loves all that God has made so much as to be willing to put God's own life on the line so that not one thing of God's good creation may come to naught.

Unfortunately, we don't often think of salvation on this grand scale but merely in human terms. The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, however, says salvation means that nothing that God the Creator made is ever lost to God. All is redeemed!

"I once was lost, but now am found," we love to sing—for good reason—but realize that it is true not only for you and for me, but also for every living thing made by God since the beginning of time. Nothing is ever lost to God! The scope of such love astounds us. Such divine prodigality defies description. If it leaves you speechless, it is as it should be.

The only Word that can adequately articulate the depth of God's love is the Word with a capital "W" — the Word who is Jesus. One of the commentators I read this week put it beautifully in saying that Jesus is the worth of our humanity to God.¹ In other words, Jesus, the Word Incarnate, shows us how highly valued we are by God. In choosing to take on flesh and blood, God shows us how much flesh and blood, how much our bodies, matter to God.

Now think about the implications of this. If flesh and blood matter enough to God for God to become human in Jesus of Nazareth, to take on a body like yours, what does that say about your body? Your body matters to God. There is no "spiritual" part of you that somehow matters more to God than the "fleshly" part of you. We are bodily creatures, and God loves these bodies of ours so much as to promise to raise them up from the destruction done to them by death. As we confess every week, we believe in the resurrection *of the body* because our bodies are priceless to God. Jesus has so proven the worth of our bodies in his incarnation, death, and resurrection that we can never say bodies are insignificant to God.

We can never say *any* bodies are insignificant to God. This is an important theological conviction in the face of racism. We know that racism doesn't make sense from the perspective of science, which teaches us that we all had a common ancestor in the evolution of our species, and that that common ancestor lived long ago in Africa. We all were black once. And whatever shade we

happen to be today, every human being is genetically 99.9% the same as every other human being on the planet.

But racism also doesn't make sense theologically. It flies in the face of an incarnational faith — everything we've been talking about today. If God loves bodies so much as to take one for God's own — which just so happened to be the brown body of an ancient Middle Eastern human — that has to mean that God loves all bodies. To say otherwise would be to place limits on the prodigality of God's love. It would be to contradict Paul's gospel that in Christ there are no longer male bodies or female bodies, Greek bodies or Jewish bodies, slave bodies or free bodies, black bodies or brown bodies or yellow bodies or purple bodies with pink highlights. *All* bodies have become *one* body in the Body of Christ, beloved and redeemed by the unreasonably extravagant love of God the Creator made flesh in Christ.

Jesus told lots of stories about the prodigality of God's love. We should take that fact seriously. If you do, you begin to take seriously your own worth in the eyes of God. And you begin to take seriously the worth of all other human beings, and of all other creatures—the worth of the earth, the moon, the sun, the stars, and the whole creation to the One who made it all and redeemed it all in Christ. Indeed, words fail except perhaps for one: “thanks”. What more can we say but thanks be to God for the gift of such extravagant love!

¹ “Give Us This Day.” www.giveusthisday.org. Accessed 29 Mar. 2019.