

Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

"An Extravagant God"

The parable found in today's Gospel lesson is not unfamiliar to many church going people. It is known as the parable of the Prodigal Son. I found it interesting that it has that name the Prodigal Son. The word "Prodigal" never even appears in this story. Over the years people have begun using the word "Prodigal" for any one who has returned after begin away. Looking into the meaning of "Prodigal" I discovered that it was not the son's leaving and returning that earned him that name, but rather his extravagance. "Prodigal" means recklessly extravagant.

The 15th chapter of Luke's gospel has three "Prodigal Stories". The appointed Gospel for today skips from verse 3 and goes to verse 11, skipping two of these stories. The parable of the Prodigal Son is so well known that it is easy to forget that it is part of a Trilogy. There are three stories, each making the same point. That point being: There is joy in heaven when the lost is found.

The first story begins at the 4th verse: Now if we were a Baptist Church the preacher would insist that you open your Bible and follow along. If you want to do that here - feel free. To help the life-long Lutherans - it's on page 78 in the New Testament part of your pew Bible, that's in the back part. The parable reads: *"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*

The Lost Sheep parable tells about one out of a hundred, one per-cent of the total. But that one was so valued by the shepherd that he would leave the 99 and search until he found the one that was lost. And than the rejoicing takes place. The lost one was found. Finding a lost sheep was enough reason for throwing a party. The story spends no time telling about scolding the sheep for wandering away from the flock, for thinking that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. That's what sheep tend to do. And Luke doesn't spend time weighing the risks involved in leaving the rest of the flock unattended. Leaving the entire flock of 99 to look for just one lost sheep. That is extravagant. Recklessly extravagant. That is what makes it the story of the prodigal shepherd.

The second parable in Luke's 15th chapter is ALSO about the lost being found: (also on page 78 of the New Testament) *"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

A Coin is lost. Coins don't just get up and walk away like sheep do. The woman most likely dropped the coin and it rolled off into a corner or under a lampstand. That's just what coins tend to do when they are dropped. Does Jesus scold the woman for losing the coin, or does he scold the coin for becoming lost?! NO! The more important lesson is his Unwillingness to let the lost remain lost. This coin is one out of ten so it must be found, not because it represents 10% while the lost sheep was only 1% of the total, but the coin must be found simply because it is lost. So the woman lights a lamp and sweeps until she finds it. When it is found she wants to rejoice with her friends, so she throws a party. Sweeping your entire house looking for one small coin which would eventually show up anyway, and throwing a party just because you found that one coin. Tat seems extravagant. Recklessly extravagant. Tat earns her the title of the Prodigal Housekeeper.

This brings us to the third "prodigal" story, the one about the lost son. Is this story any different from the two which preceded it? The ratio is different. One out of only two sons would seem to be more valuable and therefore more significant than one coin out of ten, or one sheep out of a hundred. Jesus is not talking about 1% or 10%, but 50%! But in these three prodigal parables, Jesus does not play the numbers game. He is not interested in percentages. What else could be a distinction between these three parables? Guilt always seems to be a good tool. But I doubt that sheep could be blamed for wandering off from the flock or that a coin could feel guilty. However, when it comes to the son, he does feel guilty for demanding to have his inheritance and squandering it in loose living. So how does Jesus tell this story? By focusing on how badly the young man had acted? On how unloving toward his father and brother he had been? Not at all!

In all three of these "Prodigal Parables" the emphasis is not on what had been lost, the sheep, the coin or the son, but instead, the emphasis is on the person doing the seeking; the shepherd, the woman, and the father! The most important scene in this drama comes at the point where Jesus says: "While he was still at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." The father didn't even give his son the chance to present his well rehearsed speech, because he was so overjoyed that his son who was once lost, had now been found.

Not only could these three parables be called "prodigal" because they seem so recklessly extravagant, but all three of the characters in the "prodigal son" story could each hold the title of "prodigal" themselves. The younger brother is just being your typical teenager. I think of the sign I read which said: "Hire a teenager while they still know-it-all." That's how the younger son is acting. He is a dreamer who thinks: "If only I can get away from the old man and this stupid farm and be on my own, then everything would be all right." He earns the title "prodigal" when he receives his inheritance and takes off in pursuit of his goals only to spend all his money. He was extravagant, but he acted no differently than the little child who already has a room full of toys but just has to have the toy that the boy next door has. And on the more adult level, there are those who just have to purchase that new car, or a VCR, or any type of new gadget thinking that that is what is needed to make life so much happier. And then there are those who have thoughts of quitting their jobs, or getting a divorce, or flitting off to Tahiti, longing for something different, or better, or easier. This will definitely earn you the title prodigal. That is the younger brother's path.

Then there is the older brother. While his little brother had been off living it up he had to continue his work back on the farm. His character can often be interpreted as the faithful church worker, or dutiful council member, whose steady work is all too often taken for granted. The older brother also earns the title "Prodigal" because of his extravagance. There is more to his personality than just staying behind and doing the daily chores on the farm. His extravagance comes in the jealousy he had against his brother. He is so busy being jealous of his brother that he refuses to see all that he already has, just like the kid who wants the neighbor's toy.

And the father also earns the title "Prodigal". His extravagance comes in the generosity he has for his son. He was not required to give the younger son an early inheritance. He did not have to allow him to return to the family. But he does both of these things. He welcomes him back and avoids giving him the big "I told you so" that he deserved. To top it off, just like the shepherd and the housekeeper, he calls all of his friends and rejoices by giving a party! He was generous to the point of being extravagant!

A parable is often known as: "An earthly story with a heavenly meaning". They frequently begin with the words: "The kingdom of God is like a...." These three "prodigal" parables are also telling us something about God's kingdom and about God. But the Prodigal Son story not only tells us about God, it also gives us an insight to what we are like ourselves. We are all, at times, wishful thinking prodigals like the younger son of the story. If we are honest with ourselves we have to admit that we are jealous prodigals more often than not. But there are also times when we are generous prodigals. Each one of us can be all three at some time or other, just like the three stories, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, can all have the same message. There is joy in heaven when the lost is found.

We are "Prodigal People"! We tend to live life in recklessly extravagant ways. We become so recklessly extravagant in our spending and charge accounts that we can never see a way out. We become recklessly extravagant in our relationships with other people that those we truly love become so hurt that we can never see the hope of reconciliation. But these three prodigal parables share with us one message: There is joy in heaven when the lost is found. When we think that we are so far gone that there is no way we can return, remember that the excessively generous prodigal father couldn't wait to greet his returning Son. That's how it is with God. He is just waiting for us to give him the chance to greet us.

In Atlanta, Georgia, part of the city's folklore is that the only recorded failure of RICH'S Department store to accept a return was that requested by a 7 year old boy who wished to return his baby sister for a football helmet. Rich's Department Store, under family ownership from 1867 until 1976, never asked questions about returns, and in taking back twice as much merchandise as the average department store, accepted altered clothing, items returned several years after purchase, and even merchandise from the stores of competitors. I would call their return policy recklessly extravagant. Rich's could be called the prodigal department store.

But that is God's return policy as well. No questions asked. No Exemptions. The badly damaged prodigal son was taken back with joy and feasting and placed right alongside the older brother "merchandise" that never left the store. Perhaps there has been something in your life that has kept you away from the church. Maybe there is something separating you from your spouse. There might be something at your place of employment that is upsetting you. We are all recklessly extravagant in our sinning. But the message of the Three Prodigal Parables holds true for our lives today: There is joy in heaven when the lost is found.

If you have ever doubted the depth and genuineness of God's love and compassion for you, this morning's Gospel lesson is for you. It is for every one who realizes that they have taken their inheritance of Eternal Life that they received at the time of their Baptism and then just ran off to do as they wish. God is a Prodigal God. He is recklessly extravagant in his generosity when it comes to receiving us back. The Lost Sheep wasn't scolded nor was the woman who lost the coin. The father didn't scold or punish his youngest son. Our heavenly father does not want to punish us. There is joy in heaven when the lost is found.

We are all prodigal people and God is the heavenly father waiting for us to return from our sinfulness. There is joy in heaven when the lost is found. Make God happy. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Our God is an extravagant prodigal God. Amen