

*SPENDTHRIFTS & SCATTERGOODS*

LUKE 15:1-2, 11-32

FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC

27 MARCH 2022

*Our second lesson this morning comes from the gospel of Luke, chapter 15 1-2 and 11-32. Listen for the word of the Lord:*

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The 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. <sup>13</sup>A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>But 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! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” <sup>20</sup>So 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. <sup>21</sup>Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” <sup>22</sup>But 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. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

<sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”  
And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>But 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. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>But 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.” ’

*The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

Were you to ask me what I thought the overarching story of scripture was, I would tell you something about God's redemptive love, the incarnation of infinitude, and the upbuilding of the kingdom. Big-picture stuff.

On the second order I might tell you something about liberation: the force of freedom that leads us away from whatever might bind us and toward the glory of God; I'd tell you about the image of God imprinted on each of us, the turn toward neighbor and enemy alike. Relationship stuff.

If we got to the third order, I'd tell you this: scripture unequivocally proclaims one central truth — siblings are trouble.

From page two, siblings are getting themselves suck in a maze of melodrama. There's Cain and Abel, Abraham and Lot, Isaac and Esau, Joseph, his dream-coat, and his brothers.

Their example is why I'm grateful to be an only child. I did not utter the phrase "stop touching me!" until, well, maybe now. I could play with any trinket in any corner of our house. I never had to fight for seconds or beg for attention, I never lacked for anything.

Having recently had the occasion to more closely observe the relationship of siblings, and having observed my father and his brothers and my mother and her sisters over the years, I have come to more deeply understand the core truth of scripture's third best point.

Well into their sixth and seventh decades, you will still hear my mother and her sisters referring to one another by their basest high-school identities — *the pretty one, the social butterfly, the favorite, the smart one*. Dynamics from a millennia ago on repeat, the same story, just a different setting. It's trouble all the way down, from East of Eden to Due West.

And never mind where property is involved. I'm here to tell y'all, it's the most self-evident truth in scripture, siblings are trouble.

Now Luke 15 might not remember in you as a story about brothers. Maybe you think it's a *sin* story. That's understandable: cultural memory, shaped by a generation of brimstone preachers keen to dig into the younger son's antics, often zeroes in on the so-called "prodigal." For those preachers, Luke 15 is the story of one man's sin. In that sermon, God is willing to forgive all your failings if you just come forward, make your way home, confess, grovel, and pray. The father greets you with open arms. Your sin-lovin' wafarin' soul is at rest. That sermon is fine.

Or maybe you *do* remember this as a sibling story, but the sibling you remember is the one stuck out on the farm, stewing about what he thinks he deserves. That sermon focuses in on all the worst qualities of the eldest child: he's hard-working, yes but also a know-it-all; he's righteous, yes, but judgmental. Perhaps that's the sermon you've heard — heck, I've preached it.

The elder brother sermon turns not on individual sin and salvation, but on that which alienates us from one another. Where the younger son's following after his wayward wants separated him, it was the older son's very righteousness that stood in the way of his reconciliation. This version of the sermon seeks to convict good religious folks, to hold a mirror on our lives, reflecting back all of our grumbling at God's merrymaking. That sermon is fine too.

Which sermon should I preach today?

A spoiled young son come home or  
a know it all elder son lost to his self-justifications?

Which preaches in these troubled times, as we fight for a new normal, still nursing fears and resentments built over the course of the pandemic, as the

economy teeters, as our anxiety builds, as our brothers across the ocean fight for democracy, and our kin fight to destroy it? (For indeed, both are our brothers, aren't they?)

It's sibling Sunday. The prodigal *again*. But having primed you for a story about brothers I have to admit that I don't think the sons preach this week. If Luke 15 is going to speak to us today, it's by illuminating the parable's central character, the one who binds all of Scripture's troublesome siblings together:  
the father.

Parables are meant to shock us, to leave threads dangling, to surprise us when we find ourselves convicted by the generosity of a much hated Samaritan or troubled by some new understanding of God. In this parable, it is the actions of the father that confound, not the all-too-predictable goings-on of the rebellious younger or the hardworking elder.

The father.

When I was a child — an only child, did I mention that? — I found my greatest rebellion in running away. I dramatically fled from home just about every time I didn't get my way. I'd pack up my favorite SnackWells cookies, my teddy bear, and a book, and hit the road—by which I mean trails, a web of them safely connecting streets throughout our neighborhood and featuring every hundred yards or so some type of playground equipment.

Most frequently I made it all the way to the nearest playground — about 50 yards beyond my back door. Only once did I make it further than the back yard — all the way to Frankie's Fun Park, a mile from my home. I hadn't much thought it through and I had no money, so I called home collect and informed my mother that if she ever wanted to see me again, if she had,

indeed, learned her lesson in these troublesome hours, a ride home was requested.

Of course, she obliged. And what do you think she did when I plopped myself in her passenger seat? Was there a celebration? No. She confirmed that I was unharmed and we rode home in silence. Was there a waiting surprise party on the other side of our front door? Was I greeted with a feast and the heirlooms that would otherwise come to me in a generation? Was I honored for my obstinance? *No*.

Now my mom is here today, so this is not some grand scheme to undermine her parenting. She did the right thing. I never ran away again. Luke 15 is a parable about the father, but it is surely not about parenting. Viewed through the lens of parenting, this parable seems a deterrent — the story of a spoiled child, a self-righteous curmudgeon, and a permissive parent.

So what should we say about Luke 15? It's not about parenting, it's not about sinfulness, it's not about misplaced righteousness. Historically the text is shorthand "the Parable of the Prodigal," a title nowhere in the text. I suppose we could stick with that. This is a parable about prodigality, about wastefulness and recklessness. It's just we've been looking at the wrong prodigal all these years.

The younger son is brash, cruel even. But he takes what is his by right. Upon his father's death, he will be granted  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the estate. It just so happens he wants it now. Having it, he spends it. Foolish, yes. Shortsighted, surely. But is he a *prodigal*? I'm not convinced. The elder is no prodigal either. He is too stubborn to celebrate a found son, too short-sighted to see the privilege he so deeply embodies.

Neither the younger nor the elder, this story is about the prodigality of the father and what it says about the excessive, wasteful, spendthrift prodigality of God. The father gives in to the lavish demands of his spoiled son. He

gives away a third of his estate. He allows his son to go, allows himself to be shamed by the spectacle of a son walking away from his obligations. And then, when the son finally does come home, he won't even hear the boy's rehearsed apology. He runs to greet him — a grown man in sandals and a tunic flapping in the wind like a fool — and he calls for a party. What he hasn't already given away he lavishes on the son. The ring, the robe, the best cuts of meat.

He spends and spends and gives and gives. It's absurd, wasteful, and counterintuitive. It is poor money management, heck it's a failure to comprehend basic mathematics.

Precisely the prodigality of the Father is what stirs the resentment of the elder. Realizing he has refused to join the party, the father of two sons runs to the field to bring the elder in, leaves his guests and his party, and begs. The shame of such public foolishness burns in the elder.

And we might agree with him were it not for what comes next. With his guests peering out to overhear what the man with two sons says, he deftly turns attention away from either son, pointing instead to the bounty that is offered to both by the gift of his presence.

“All that I have is yours.” The story rises and falls on it — bad math, nonsensical economics. Giving all to the younger does not preclude all that is there for the elder, giving lavishly to the elder leaves a bounty still for the youngest. Friends, this is the good news of the gospel. This father's reserve does “without depletion overflow.”

It's shameful, nonsensical, foolish prodigality — Paul said as much when writing ( ). The math of God's wide welcome and insistent embrace isn't the math we are used to, it isn't the inheritance we have come to expect. It doesn't match the economics of the world, where more for me is less for you. This is the arithmetic of the kingdom where drawing from the wells of

God's welcome and depth of God's love only *increases* its store. The well of welcome never drawn down.

I struggled this week with what new thing this parable could say. It wasn't *sinner, repent!*, and neither was it a good old fashioned scolding to religious folks.

It all goes back to siblings, actually.  
All the trouble that they cause.  
And all the opportunity they present.

We focus on the ways the father reaches both sons — running to greet one, going out to the field to bring in the other. In both cases seeking and finding. The less considered corollary is equally worth our consideration: God's going out is an attempt to bring them back in *together*. It's not just the elder and the father or the younger and the father secure in a singular unity. In the kingdom of God the hoped for reality is a family restored, a community of people, the children of one father.

Siblings are trouble, I still believe it. Had I written it the story would be of only children. Adam and Eve beget Cain and all went well. Joseph got the amazing technicolor dream-coat and no one much cared. Mary did not lament at her brother's grave. No one touched anyone, no one stole another's favorite lovvie, no one was bothered and the kingdom got here in an orderly march, right on time. But such sterile order will not do for the father of two sons and many more. The trouble, the opportunity is the oint. That father's very being is hinged on community — a trinity of persons, three in one. Singularity, whether stubborn or selfish, is not the will of God, and it's not what we were created for.

Stories of siblings in Scripture are stories of opportunity, of troubled possibility, of diverse wills and ways called to one household. At the end of Luke 15 the Father stands in the field with his son while his youngest feasts



inside. The Father wills one thing — but it requires the acquiescence of the sons, the releasing of resentments, the acceptance of lavish, undeserved generosity, and the acknowledgment of privilege. Will the younger come out to greet his brother? Will the eldest finally go to the feast? We don't know. Jesus turns to his hearers...*would you?*

The father meets us where we are, on the road or in the fields, in a sanctuary or on our couches, and calls us to one another, calls us to embody the lavish, prodigal, foolish love of the man with two sons.

So how does this preach? What does it mean to welcome prodigally, to give beyond measure, to pour out our resources without fear of scarcity, while refugees pour in from Ukraine — further stressing a system stretched from the Syrian refugee crisis years ago? How can we offer a spendthrift welcome, a counterintuitive, bad-math sense of giving to those whose lives have been laid waste? How can we welcome one another back, despite all our differences, in this era of the pandemic? How can we make a home for families who are being called abusive for pursuing gender affirming care, and for trans kids caught in a war of rhetoric over their bodies, equally made in God's image, equally beloved. How can we turn toward one another, assured of our place at the table, assured that we are enough and we will have enough? How can we make welcome, draw each of us from the well?

Here we are. The children of a prodigal father, whose love is enough for each of us. Here we are, called back to our troublesome siblings, because the Kingdom of God wouldn't be complete without them. The father insists, the call echos: release your resentments, release your selfishness, think not of scarcity, but of an abundant welcome. And then live it.