

Sermon on Luke 15: 1-3, 11b – 32

March 14, 2010

They blamed him for the way the kids turned out. He spoiled them silly. They had too much of everything. They said he was foolish, extravagant, prodigal. That one puzzled him. It was said so often that he ended up at the dictionary, but the only thing it told him was another way to say extravagant—prodigal—extravagant—just like him. He couldn't help it. Whenever he thought it was time to pull back a little, tighten up on the reins, he imagined them the first time he had seen them—small, red, wrinkled heads peering up at him just after their birth. Back then a wave of love had crashed over him and threatened to completely drown him. It was the same now. Every time he thought about what they said—that he was ruining them, that they would never know how to stand on their own two feet—he would remember with a kind of shock that they were his children, and that crazy, foolish, prodigal love would engulf him.

He had been in a position to give them everything. There were those who said that he was master of the moon and the stars, but it was just a way of talking. If the moon and the stars were his, then he had put them at their disposal. The mountains and the hills also, the cedars of Lebanon, the great roaring cataracts. In a way it was true. Everything he had created, he had done with them in mind.

He had enjoyed it all before they were born, everything he owned. It had all been kind of prodigal then, the variety and lushness of everything he owned. His critics might have said that no one needed quite so much of everything, but he enjoyed it all. He would go walking in the cool of the evening and it pleased him to see everything and to call it his own. But there was something else. He was lonely. There was an empty space and he knew it. So that whenever he walked around and took pleasure in what he was looking at, he would want to turn and share it. So there had been a wife, someone to share it all with. And there was love. And he wasn't so lonely anymore.

And soon after, there were the boys, the older and the younger. The older so much like him it was frightening. Good at everything. Happy to work and play in the abundance that was there. He worked hard, making even more of what had already been quite a bit. He came home each evening and his tired was the good kind that meant that you had given everything you had

in the day. The father worked with him and they had a good kind of relationship going. There was not a day that went by that the two of them didn't talk about this or that. You didn't have to be lonely with him around—you could always count on him and that was good. Here was someone with whom the father could share both the burdens and the joys of being the father. The love was returned and that was an amazing thing to behold. You couldn't say that the gifts had gone to this boy's head, because he didn't wear them that way. He seemed grateful for them, but more than that. He seemed to know, somehow, that he was a steward of the things of his father, that somehow he would have to take care of them.

They blamed him for the way the younger one turned out. No one said much before it happened, but afterwards there wasn't one old biddy who didn't have an opinion about it, and who didn't mind sharing that opinion around whatever kitchen table she found her feet under. Spoiled. Allowed to roam around the countryside like he owned the whole thing—well, what did it matter that he did? Restless. No good. Who wouldn't be happy with the whole world in his hands? They said, "It's the old man's fault. He gave them the moon and the stars and what good did it do him?" "Extravagant." "Prodigal."

What they didn't know about was the love. How the old man tortured himself with thoughts, "When (he) was a child I loved him. The more I called him, the more he went from me. Yet it was I who taught him to walk. I took him up in my arms, I led him around with kindness." (Hosea 11) They didn't know how the old man sat up nights, bled- out with loving his son.

Because of course the boy was born to go away. The restlessness in him was for other things than his father provided—other places than the places he knew. When you have the moon and the stars, a kind of thirst comes over you to see what else is missing. You can't believe that this extravagance is real. There must be something held back, something hoarded. As a child, you cannot understand the love that drives a father to give everything, so you reason that there must be something held back, something kept from you.

That started early with the boy. While his brother was happy to roam the hills and valleys of perfection, the younger son brooded about the secrets his father was keeping from him. If this life was good, then the life beyond reach of his father must be truly magnificent.

And as the idea took hold, it mushroomed into something like an obsession. Oblivious in the way children are of the hurt within their power, he began to push his father to let him go. Perhaps he didn't see that he scorned his father's love, because he was so accustomed to having that love. But he began to pull away. A part of him began to live elsewhere—out there. Not in a reality exactly, but in a made-up world where other impulses were indulged.

The things his father told him were not to be done—why were they forbidden? His father said that they were not for his good, but what if that were not true? What if they were not bad things, but simply things his father didn't appreciate? His mind began to mold around the things that were forbidden until they reached untold proportions. He tried to work alongside his brother, and appreciate the gifts of his father, but the new things called to him. They had power. They began to take over. So that one day, he went to his father and demanded release. Seeing the hurt on his father's face, he almost broke down, but the new things called and they were strong within him. He pushed and pulled at his father's great love, until that love let him go. And he went to a distant land, the land of the new things.

Who can tell of the father's pain? At that moment, the great wave of love was so great it threatened to drown him, because the father looked into the face of his young son and saw the child he had formed and he thought, "How can I give you up? How can I hand you over?" (Hosea 11). How does love act? When every impulse screams to grab tight and not let go, how does love respond? When love knows that the path the beloved is traveling is fraught with danger and heartache and loss, how does love let go? The father, knowing the world and the ways of the world, had always tried to teach his children the right path, the good and righteous path. And he had always said, "Let me and this love and this world we share be sufficient for you." Let there be nothing else before this.

But the father, knowing the world and the ways of the world, knew also of the dissolute living and of the many ways a fortune could be squandered. Did the father's mind rush ahead to the famine, the starvation, the menial job taken just to keep body and soul together, the pigs? Did the father long to keep his child whole and well-fed, healthy and safe? Did the father fear for the life that love knew must be let go? How slowly the old arms must have released the son! How long must he have stood, rooted to that spot, looking after his son's departing body. He knew another kind of prodigality then —the prodigality of tears.

Much has been said elsewhere about the life of the son in the distant country. We don't know everything there is to be known. How it must have rocked him to the core to learn that the things which promised so much were empty and without substance. That lesson takes awhile to learn, but when it comes, it hits dead-hard. We know that the money flowed like champagne, but that when it stopped everything stopped. The progression from wild elation over the new and decadent to awareness of its hollowness moves slowly. But when it comes, the feeling of shame and disgust is almost overpowering. All these must have bloomed in the young man, for his upbringing had been good and solid, and must have provided even more of a contrast to his new lessons. Looking over the back of pigs, with their stench in your nostrils, it is guaranteed that your mind will take you back to the verdant hills of home, prodigal in their lush variety. It is said that when he thought of his father, he wept like a child, bitter tears of such remorse it wounded you to see them. It is known that when he thought of going home, he trembled. So great was his awareness of what he had said and done.

No one knows who was the first to spot him. How did anyone even recognize him, so great was the change? It was on the outskirts of town, for sure, because the murmurs began. Because everyone knew of the great scandal, everyone wanted to see them have it out. Everyone had an idea of what that would be like and everyone knew what *they* would say in the same position. It mostly ran like, "Who do you think you are, to slink back here after what you've put me through?" and on from there. The money was 2- to -1 that he wouldn't even be allowed inside the far gate, because that's what anyone would do—send a servant out to kick him off the premises before he even got *on* the premises. Even those who had been the hardest on the father for how he had raised the sons had softened over the last year, as they watched him move about, hollow-eyed in his grief. *They* were the ones who wanted to encounter this skunk on the road, to 'give him a piece of my mind' as the saying goes. No one should treat their father like that.

And the boy, now man? How he even made those last miles is a wonder. He must have shaken in apprehension as he approached the familiar turn. The thing was, he couldn't turn back. Everyone had seen him. Everyone knew. Besides which, he had nowhere to go. There was nothing for him if his father wouldn't take him on as a servant. No one would have him. Not now.

Now the way it is told it is a wonder and a mystery to hear. No one can say the real truth, because no one really knows the heart of another. I will say that just as everyone sucked in their breath, anticipating the really good show of anger and the venting of emotions, they were shocked out of that breath.

For the one who had been wronged past believing, whose love had been scorned not only privately but publically, who had been treated as dead in the eyes of the world, and as worthless in the only eyes that mattered; the one who mastered the moon and the stars, and everything that anyone could remember ever belonging to anyone, he made a fool of himself and ran to that no-good boy. He held him like someone was going to snatch him away again. He cried on his neck like he wasn't an old man, and a man of great dignity, but some blubbering boy. I would say there wasn't a dry eye anywhere, but it mostly goes without saying, because no one had ever, ever seen that kind of love. No one really believed it. It was as extravagant as it had been wounded. It was as prodigal as it had been desecrated. As he held the boy's ravaged face between his hands, he murmured, "My lost son, my dead son, come back to me" and that's when everyone turned away and let them have it private.

Later, after the party was underway, the father slipped out to the fields and pretty much told his other son, "What you and I have always enjoyed, this good and solid love, is always there. You know that. But that love has to celebrate when something like this happens, because something like this only enlarges that love. Now c'mon in and eat some cake."

The party, which was going on for days, I've heard tell, was something to behold. Now there are those who wonder how such a party could get thrown together on such short notice. But you know, the father had been planning that party forever—since the day his boy took off, hoping for the day with his feet would turn towards home. There are those who say that the old man watched for that boy's return every day of that time, his old eyes scanning the horizon for a glimpse of that boy. I don't doubt that at all. Love is patient and kind.

Down through the ages, we have been blessed because we have known ourselves to be the daughters and sons of God. And the grace of it is that we have always known God as our Father.