

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus told them this parable:

Jesus said, “A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the inheritance.’ Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

“When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, but I’m starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.”’ So he got up and went to his father.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant replied, ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.’ Then the older son was furious and didn’t want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. He answered his father, ‘Look, I’ve served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you’ve never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’ Then his father said, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.’”

The Way Home

The Prodigal Father

March 15, 2026

Rev. Boone Clayton

Denbigh United Presbyterian Church

Newport News, Virginia

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

“Welcome home.” These words were frequently used to greet me in my first few weeks back from sabbatical. Strange, in a way, because I had so much time in my family home and had so much bonus time with my wife and kids; but the ‘welcome homes’ hit the nail right on the head because I had been a church refugee for three months and I was finally back in my ‘church home.’ They were apt, because they resonated such truth within me. Over the three months, I did sneak into the building on occasion to do this and that – starting with **November 17**, my first day of sabbatical, when I was determined to clean my office, hang pictures, and get all my receipts to the treasurer before checking out – but I had an especially poignant moment when I stole into the sanctuary for a special Saturday worship service ahead of that January ice storm. It truly did feel like coming home, and it was all the more special to witness a family join the church with four (4!) baptisms. Goosebumps.

Today’s passage from Luke is a popular story that, along with the Good Samaritan and Luke’s birth narrative, is the big reason Luke sometimes vies for the title of my favorite gospel.

- It could be 20 sermons, but right now I only have this one, so I spent my three month sabbatical combining those 20 sermons and writing a thesis for you all today! (*I had a big stack of paper from a side table to pretend like it was my sermon.*)
- Hey, I worshiped in many churches during my sabbatical, and in one the sermon was over 50 (fifty!) minutes long. People seemed to like it, guys; I think we should try it...

I'll remind you of a few important notes though, just to refresh your memory:

- The story is one of three that Jesus tells in a row after the Pharisees and scribes have taken him to task for eating with sinners. Jesus does not argue with them. He tells them stories instead, about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep to fend for themselves while he went after one stray, about a woman who turned her house upside down in order to find one lost coin, and about a compassionate father who dealt graciously with his two sons. All three stories address the Pharisees' concern that Jesus is condoning sin by keeping the company he keeps, and all three reply that God is too busy rejoicing over found sheep, found coins, and found children to worry about what they did while they were lost.
- We typically call the parable the prodigal son and prodigal means 'wasteful or extravagant expenditure'
- Inheritance laws dictated that in this situation, the younger son would get one third of the estate (the eldest son would get a double share, or two thirds, because...we're awesome?)
- This could easily be interpreted as wanting his father to die, or living as if the father were dead to the son
- In the land of Far, Far Away that the son has traveled to, he wasted everything through "reckless abandon" (one of my favorite translations of that phrase we often hear as extravagant/dissolute living) and there is now a severe food shortage. For the Jewish listener in Jesus' time, there would have been a connection to the seven year famine in Egypt when Joseph was there. This connection is confirmed when the son says to himself the same words Pharaoh says to Moses and Aaron: I have sinned against heaven and against you.
- The father "ran to him." You've probably heard before that this would have been a big deal because the father would have been wearing a robe not too unlike the one I'm wearing now and running just...was not done. It would probably have looked as ridiculous as I would if I were to race my kids in this robe. I'd probably still win...but it would be a funny sight.
- He repents to his father using Pharaoh's words, though hopefully more earnestly than Pharaoh, and the father does not even respond to the son; instead he immediately gives him a ring, a robe, and sandals, all symbols of a restored status in the household. The son wanted his father to be dead to him and him dead to his father, but the father undoes that harsh act immediately.
- The fattened calf that's mentioned – and is clearly a point of contention with the older son – is really a singular calf that was set aside in households that could afford it, was kept in a stall, and fed on grain – human food – so that its meat would be

particularly rich and tender. We call this veal. Personally, I don't eat veal, but it is a great luxury now and a greater one then.

- Which brings us to the older brother, the one who has done everything right, and his complaints that he would like to file with Human Resources. To be honest, the older brother makes some good points – I think if nothing else he's allowed to be peeved that no one came to get him from the fields for this big party – but my favorite phrase in his part of the story is when he calls his brother “this son of yours.” But when this son of yours returned, after he wolfed down, in dubious company of ill repute, the property that was *your* livelihood, you've sacrificed the baby cow for him.
  - o Isn't it interesting that he's not upset about the return of the son or the restored status of his brother, but about the extravagant response to the return after the extravagant and wasteful actions of the younger son in the land of Far, Far Away.
  - o “This son of yours” makes me smile because of stories my wife, Julie, and I tell one another about the kids. If we begin the story with, “Listen to what *your* son/daughter did...” we know there's going to be a story where the child exemplifies a distinctive trait in the other person. In our house, it's used for comic effect, but I think the brother is using it to remind the father that the younger brother wanted to be dead to them and them dead to him. And how does the father address the younger son in his response? “This brother of yours!” He is reiterating to his older son that the relationship is not dead, it is restored.

This is when I have to remind myself that the purpose of parables is, most often, to tell us about God and God's kingdom. We can and should emulate God as often as we can, but I also know that some parents are challenged by grown children with addictions, mental illnesses, or abusive tendencies. While the passage shows God's unconditional, limitless love for us as children of God, I do want to be mindful of difficult situations when parents are faced with difficult choices. God's ways are not always our ways, and God's thoughts are not always our thoughts, as the scriptures remind us time and time again.

Who is the real subject of this story? We call it the prodigal son but I suggest verse 11 is unambiguous – “A certain man had two sons.” – about who the subject is: the father, the prodigal...father.

The father turns out to be prodigal too, at least as far as his love is concerned. Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote that he never seems to tire of giving his love away. (*The Preaching Life*) “Son,” he says, reclaiming the boy, “you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” His love for one child does not preclude his love for the other. The younger one's

recklessness cannot deflect it any more than the elder one's righteousness. They are a family; they belong to one another, and a party for one is a party for all.

It is the elder brother's invitation back into relationship not only with the loving father, but also with the wayward brother. It is an invitation to recognize his own 'lostness' and 'foundness,' but the parable does not tell us how it all turned out. The story ends with the elder brother standing outside the house in the yard with his father, listening to the party going on inside. Jesus leaves it that way, I think, because it is up to each one of us to decide whether we will stand outside all alone being right, or give up our rights and go inside to take our place at a table full of reckless and righteous saints and scoundrels, brother and sisters united only by our relationship to one loving father, who refuses to give us the love we deserve but cannot be prevented from giving us the love we need.

We talked about coming home earlier, whether it's to your actual father, mother, brothers, and sisters or to your heavenly father and your brothers and sisters in Christ. I am glad that the younger son found the way home just as I am happy to be back in my church home here.

But in this story, home as a place isn't the point, it isn't all that important. What the prodigal father and what God care about is the relationship and its restoration. It is the son's heart, just like ours, that is important to be home.