

A Party for All of Us

The Prodigal, Luke 15:11-32

(Includes an excerpt from Thomas Long's "Shepherds and Bathrobes")

Slide One: Party Tonight

In a book called "Shepherds and Bathrobes", Thomas Long tells the following story:

"I was once staying in a motel in a large city and was surprised to find, posted to the elevator door, a small handwritten notice that read, "Party Tonight in Room 210 at 8:00PM. Everyone invited!" I could hardly picture who would throw such a party, or for what reason, but I imagined that at 8:00PM, room 210 would be filled by an unlikely assortment of people:

Sales representatives seeking a little relief from the tedium of the road; a vacationing couple tired of sightseeing; a person stopping overnight in the middle of a long journey, looking for a bit of festivity; a few inquisitive and wary motel employees, there because of professional

responsibility; perhaps some young people who had slipped out of their parents' rooms, anxiously curious about what was happening in room 210.

But, alas, the sign by the elevator soon came down, replaced by a typewritten statement from the motel staff explaining that the original notice was a hoax, a practical joke. That made sense, of course, but in a way, it was too bad. For a brief moment, those of us staying at the motel were tantalized by the possibility that there just might be a party going on somewhere to which we were all invited - a party where it did not make much difference who we were when we walked in the door..."

Slide: The Parable of...

Being invited to a surprise party no matter who you are...now that's a party only God can throw, which brings us to the party that is described in what is probably the most well-known teachings of Jesus that we often call the story of the Prodigal Son.

The context behind this parable or teaching story that Jesus tells begins with Pharisees and scribes doing their usual complaining and grumbling about Jesus hanging out with all sorts of people of whom they don't approve. In the reading from Luke's Gospel just heard, these same Pharisees are overheard saying: "This man receives sinners and eats with them!" By saying this, they are suggesting that if Jesus is going to have parties with lots of various people who are normally not the sort who keep the rules, than what kind of Savior could he possibly claim to be anyway? In response, Jesus then tells a homecoming story.

Now, maybe it's just me, but has this story gotten to be a bit cliché? Next to the Christmas story, the Easter story and the story of the Good Samaritan, this is likely one of the more familiar, but it's also one of the most beautiful stories in the bible. It is a powerful example of God's grace. But, along with other stories of this kind, it can kind of feel stale. The opening line alone gives us a clue into the

familiar cliché, "There was a man who had two sons," and before we know it, we are at a party, almost forgetting the difficulty in between the start of the story to the end.

Many of us have heard this story so often like the Christmas story that I wonder if the power kind of gets lost. The anguish of the younger son proclaiming, "I'm no longer worthy to be called your son," seems all too soon to fade into the happy ending of the father accepting him. With a happy ending like that, who can really remember the pigsty anyway?

But, maybe this story about a man who had two sons has some surprises for us still, as this well - worn story turns itself on its head. It really was meant to turn the Pharisee's grumbling upside-down. Shouldn't it still do the same for us? We might ask then, who is this story really about? And, who in this story really is the prodigal one? Which character is the real prodigal in this story?

For many centuries, theologians, teachers, and

pastors have called this story the prodigal son story. Jesus is not the one giving this story a title by the way. Rather, we are. We have. Along the centuries, we have coined this story the story of the Prodigal Son. But, that just may be a very narrow cultural bias that we have applied to this story, as if to say that we should relate to the younger son as we relate to God – always in needs of homecoming.

However, if you look in the dictionary at the word “prodigal”, which I did this week, the word prodigal means: “extravagant wastefulness” or “A person being wasteful in their extravagance.” For those of you, like me, who really didn’t intuit the true meaning of the word, now we do! A prodigal is a person who is extravagantly wasteful.

Slide: Prodigal Son & Pigs

The obvious answer to the question of who is the prodigal in this story then is what many historians have claimed, that indeed it must be the younger son. He did, after

all, treat his father as if he was dead by asking for his inheritance early. He did travel to a foreign land and spend it all wastefully in an extravagant way, acting as if he would never run out of money. He did waste his life extravagantly doing something other than what his father planned for him. He is wasteful...with opportunity, with money, with his inheritance, and might I also add wasteful with his youth.

Slide: Older Son

Yet, another character who we may wonder is a prodigal is the older son, who remained at home while his younger brother went away. Applied to this son are often the Pharisees Jesus is telling the story to or, today, faithful followers of Jesus who get rather a bit upset when grace is bestowed upon the unfaithful. While this older son does not ask for his father’s money and run away, he does extravagantly waste his life resenting the brother and the father. He is wasteful in his treatment of relationships, is envious, and seems to think the

father not in the least bit generous. If it is not wasteful that a person refuses relationship in such an unfortunate manner, than I can't imagine a more wasteful person.

Therefore, each son seems like a prodigal. They each show no concern for the father's feelings. Both distance themselves from the father, either in physical distance or emotional distance. Both seem to resent the father for being in control of the estate or farm, and both prefer parties with their friends instead of with their father. If that isn't wasteful extravagance, than I don't know what is.

So, is the prodigal, the younger or the older son or both? What if I were to propose to you that there is another prodigal in this story, possibly the only one - that of the father.

Slide: Prodigal God

The father, who Jesus likely intends to represent God in this story, is truly a prodigal, in that the father's love is

extravagant and far more wasteful than either of the two son's careless living and proud strictness combined. This father is a parent who seems to love beyond what even seems healthy by today's standards, who runs to the son with tears in his eyes while also saying to the older son, "everything I have is yours."

This parent is extravagantly wasteful in his love because the two sons certainly may not deserve that love and we don't actually know if in the future they will love the Father in return. Nothing in this story says that either son loves this father of theirs. Furthermore, this is a father who wants a party. He wants to celebrate and invites everyone. And, if we were to continue the analogy that this father figure in the story is God, this is a father who continues to be incredibly wasteful in giving away everything, even his own son so that all his children may be claimed for the biggest party ever.

In this story, it is God, who is extravagantly wasteful

with love, giving up all to the sons and daughters of the world, whether or not they come to their senses and come home or whether or not they stay at home full of resentment. This parent will do anything for us even though it really could and should be seen as a waste of resources. And, given how we treat this world and the way the world is today, who would blame God for wanting to walk away?

You may have noticed that the story of a father who had two sons has no ending. Jesus doesn't tell us what happens to these two brothers. Jesus leaves the story open for ourselves to finish...for everyone here can relate to one of the two brothers: One who leaves the embrace of God to look for other things in life or one who dutifully remains in the life of faith, rule bound and reluctant to accept the younger brother's return. I'm sure we even could say there is something in between, too.

The important point then is how we relate to the father of this story. As the older or younger sibling, how do we

take advantage of God or expect from God without really knowing who it is that is extravagantly wasteful in love.

Slide: Prodigal Party

For that extravagant love says to each and every one of us: "You are always with me. Everything I have is yours." Then, God invites us to the party, the biggest surprise party you will ever see. For this is a God who is willing to waste it all in order to bring us home again. Amen.