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The Federated Church of Hyannis
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THE PRODIGAL'S FATHER

Luke 15:1, 11b-32

We used to live in a small town that was graced by some 50 miles of groomed walking trails. A friend of ours, believing I would benefit from going for long walks, offered to familiarize me with the trails. For many weeks we would meet on Sunday afternoons and he would show me trail after trail wandering through the woods of this town.

One Sunday we went walking after I had preached on this parable. There are three people mentioned in the parable. We are most familiar with the younger son. He is known to us as the prodigal son. His behavior on leaving home is troublesome while his decision to return is to be celebrated. Then there is the older brother. His sense of responsibility is to be admired. His bitterness at his brother's return is not. Then there is the father.

At one point in our walk that day, my friend turned to me and said, "John, I am the prodigal's father." He went on to tell me painful tales about his daughter, how she got herself into all kinds of compromising sexual situations, how she quite high school, and how she had made it her life's goal to have a child out of wedlock. "John, I am the prodigal's father." And the last I knew she had two children, neither by the man she married, but her parents still love her very much and that is one reason that, in spite of it all, she is kind and loving, close to her family, and a good mother in her own right.

Many of us are the prodigal's father or mother. We have kids who have done things that have hurt us, that have violated what we taught them, that betrayed our trust. Maybe you picked up the paper one day to learn of their arrest just as everyone else and then the phone calls came from curious friends and the pain and humiliation intensified. Maybe you are still waiting for the lost child to return.

Being prodigal is not necessarily a bad thing. One meaning of the word refers to excessive and undisciplined spending. The other meaning of

prodigal is to be overflowing, effusive, extravagant, lavish, excessive, abundant, and wildly generous. But it was the prodigal spending behavior which led the younger brother to a destructive life. This was a family of means. We can recon that because the father had servants. When he asked for his inheritance, we can presume it was sizable. He evidently had much with which to be prodigal.

In first century Palestine, sons normally received their inheritance on the death of their father. Even if the son received it while his father was still alive he was expected to stay at home and tend to the farm and provide for his parents. So the younger son's request is impudent and disrespectful, in essence, saying, "Give me what I would have if you were dead." One day when journalists asked Prince Charles about his ascending to the throne of England, he stopped the conversation cold by saying, "Gentlemen, you are speaking of the death of my mother."

The younger son showed no such sense of respect or even affection for his father. We are not told why. Maybe he was just impetuous, acting and speaking without giving it much thought. Perhaps he was a typical younger brother, less serious and more playful, feeling less need to be responsible, especially since it was the custom then that the older brother would inherit two-thirds of the estate and he only got a third.

The father agreed and he got the money, not to stay and work and invest but just to take off. Theirs was not a mobile culture. This son was guilty of assuming an initiative that belonged to his father, treating his father as if he were dead, ignoring his obligation to his parents in their old age and breaking the family relationship by leaving. All that and he ended up working for pig owners, a terrible disgrace for a Jewish man. He had become a pig person who ate what pigs ate, and who thought that his own father would not accept him as a son, but maybe at least take him in as a servant.

Maybe for you it was a crisis when your children left home. Maybe it was a crisis when they did not leave home. If you have ever tried to reconcile with one child only to have another cause a fuss, you are the prodigal's parent. It is never easy being the prodigal's parent. The responsible older son became the angry irresponsible child. He accused his brother of spending money on prostitutes with no real evidence of that. He did not even call him his

brother just, “this son of yours.” He tried to put his father in the situation of choosing between the two.

While love is patient and kind, the older brother, in a real sense, did what St. Paul warned of – he rejoiced in the wrong, he reveled in the wrong, he tried to make points describing the wrong of his brother. Perhaps the younger son did spend money on prostitutes. Or he might just have made bad investments or just spent his money lavishly but foolishly. He was certainly prodigal in the sense of spending so expansively. A lot of people do that when they suddenly come into great amounts of money as do many professional athletes and entertainers.

We cannot measure how sincere the sorrow was of the younger brother in returning. Was he sorry for what he did or sorry it was not as much fun as he thought it would be? Was it his heart or his stomach that led him to return? If he had not been in need, if there was no famine in that land to which he went, if he made good investments instead of bad would he have returned home? Perhaps not. I think it is not so important whether he was sorry for what he did or sorry that what he did put him in a bad situation or sorry because he caused his family such grief. It all comes out the same.

After the public apology by Tiger Woods, there was what I consider the unseemly behavior of people taking polls to determine how sincere his apology was, as though we have a capacity to make such judgments and as though it really matters to God. What matters is that the son for whatever reason was sorry and he headed home. Moments of salvation and redemption are usually messy and do not necessarily appear very spiritual. Sometimes it is just wanting to get out of the stench of the pig sty that brings us back.

As the story unfolds, it was the father who saw the son before the son saw the father. The son walked home head bowed practicing his speech. The son was thinking how to apologize and return to his father’s good graces. The father had certainly been looking for the son and thinking how to celebrate his return. He saw his son and ran to him.

We live in a world full of joggers. But they did not. Elderly men in robes and sandals did not run, but this father ran to greet his son. It was an overflowing, prodigal, extravagant welcome the father gave. Prodigal is not a bad thing when it is an overflowing, effusive, extravagant, lavish,

excessive, profuse, abundant, and wildly generous welcome when the lost come home.

Not every father and mother are willing to do so. Retired seminary professor Fred Craddock was preaching on the parable of the prodigal son. After the service a man said, "I really didn't care much for that, frankly." Dr. Craddock asked, "Why?" The man said, "Well, I guess it's not your sermon, I just don't like that story." Dr. Craddock asked, "What is it you don't like about it?" He said, "It's not morally responsible." Dr. Craddock asked, "What do you mean by that?" "Forgiving that boy," said the man.

Dr. Craddock asked, "Well, what would you have done?" It was then he learned he was talking with an attorney. The man said, "I think when he came home he should have been arrested." Dr. Craddock thought the man was going to tell him a joke, but he was really serious. Dr. Craddock asked the man, "What would you have given the prodigal?" The man said, "Six years."

In Jesus' parable, it is the father who is prodigal in the sense of being overflowing, effusive, extravagant, lavish, excessive, abundant, and wildly generous to his son. The sons get a lot of our attention but the real star of the story is the dad. He was a prodigal father because his love was so vast and so overflowing. None of us needs to feel guiltier. None of us needs to be reminded of our failures. None of us needs to have shame added to our embarrassment. When we are lost, we do not need reminders of our past. We need someone to find us and welcome us home.

In first century Palestine, there were small villages where everybody knew everybody. You did not just leave your family, you left the village. You did not just return to the family, but you also returned to the village as well. The fatted calf was not a small animal for a family gathering. Because it is a larger animal it meant that neighbors, perhaps the whole village, was to be part of the feast.

In slaughtering the fatted calf, the father sent the message that he had restored this son to their family and to community as well. Part of what restored him was the banquet. It is a time the father told all who would hear that his son had returned and was welcomed home in love. Relationships are restored. Life goes on. It did not mean less for the older brother, but more feasting and music and dance. It meant a bigger party, a prodigal party.

One last story: Perhaps you remember Reverend Anne Robinson, Director of the Massachusetts Bible Society, who preached here a couple of years ago. She tells the story of a man most people have never heard of: Edward Tuckerman, Jr. She had never heard either, until she started researching the founders of the Massachusetts Bible Society for its bicentennial.

Edward Tuckerman was a baker. He was born December 27, 1740, and spent 50 years as a baker in Boston's south end, taking just a bit of time out to be a second lieutenant during the American Revolution. What set him apart as a baker, however, was not his longevity in the field, but the fact that he discovered how to keep biscuits fresh on long ocean voyages.

That discovery meant that his business grew by leaps and bounds, and soon he had over 300 employees and was serving all the ports of New England. He had many notable accomplishments, was a founder of several charitable societies, and was even a state senator. Of special note to us is what he did every New Year's Day.

If you owed Mr. Tuckerman money as the books were closed out for the preceding year, you got a call from him. If any delinquent borrower, whether an individual or a business, could show that they did not have the ability to pay, he forgave the debt. Large, small, it did not matter. Every dime was forgiven. You were not put on a payment plan but forgiven.

Edward Tuckerman was an Episcopalian, active in Trinity Church in Boston as was his father before him. He would have known the "Lord's Prayer" since childhood. As a baker, he probably thought often of "Give us this day our daily bread" in relation to his business and, of course, the very next line is "and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

While many churches substitute "trespasses" or "sins" for "debts," the word in Greek is an economic term. As hard as it is to forgive sins, more people are willing to forgive sins than are willing to forgive debt. Not so with Mr. Tuckerman and, if it had a negative impact on his business, it was not enough to impact his ability to give generously to the Massachusetts Bible Society, his church, and others in need.

Edward Tuckerman was able to forgive all his debtors every New Year's Day for two reasons. The first is that he was not in debt himself. He did not

need to collect the debts of others to pay off his own debts. The second reason he was able to forgive debts is because he knew that neither the bread he made nor the money that came as a result really belonged to him.

He was a steward of God's resources and knew that the opportunities and inspiration that made him a successful businessman were God's gifts to him. God gifted him so that he might in turn pass God's gifts along to others. So for 50 years, Edward Tuckerman made the daily bread upon which people depended. And when they could not pay, it became a gift, a debt forgiven.

Prodigal: the overflowing, effusive, extravagant, lavish, excessive, abundant, and wildly generous forgiveness and welcome the father gave, beyond measure and beyond deserving. The father was overwhelming in welcoming back his son. And the father was also willing to help the older son deal with his anger and resentment.

As God's heart is filled with forgiveness, so should our heart be, hearts filled with joy in the return of one who was lost. Prodigal: overflowing, effusive, extravagant, lavish, excessive, abundant, and wildly generous, beyond measure and beyond deserving. It is how God is and how we should be. It is how God treats us and how we should treat one another.