

Sermon for Sunday, March 31, 2019 - "Prodigal God"

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 31, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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One note before the Gospel is read. This Lent we have been focusing on the Psalms, but I couldn't do it this week! Our Gospel story today is often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is such a key parable for our life of faith that I couldn't just read it and not preach on it. So, this is our preaching text for today.

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The two brothers in this story seem completely opposite from each other.

The older brother stays close to home with his nose to the grindstone. The younger one hightails it to a distant country and squanders what he's been given.

Once he has nothing left, *then* he realizes he'd be better off as a servant in his father's house. The older brother claims he slaves away and yet gets nothing.

The father throws a party for his younger son - kills the fatted calf for him; the older son complains he can't even get a goat.

It's easy to see and emphasize the contrasts between these two brothers. We often do that when we hear this parable. We tend to identify with one of these brothers and demonize the other. Or, perhaps we identify with the aching father who seems torn between these two very different sons.

Yet these brothers also have much in common. They both distance themselves from their father and their family, albeit in different ways.

The younger son says to his father, basically, I wish you were dead. I can't wait until you die to get my share of what you have - give it to me now. Then he goes far away and squanders his father's gift, his father's savings, his father's legacy. The older son stays physically close, yet allows resentment and anger to be a wedge between himself and his family. He refuses to go into the party when his brother returns. He even refuses to acknowledge him as his brother saying, "when this son of yours came back."

Both sons break their father's heart by creating this distance.

These brothers are not so different from one another, and not so different from us. We have all sorts of ways of creating distance in relationships with other people and God. We flee, hide, withdraw, get angry, avoid. We may or may not have run far away; but we have all, in some way, squandered the love God has given us. We may not be quite as bitter as the older brother; but we have all felt overlooked, left out, and resentful at time.

We also know what it's like to be this father - longing for someone who has left us, physically or emotionally. And we wonder how to respond to people who hurt us. Should we welcome them with open arms or does that just enable them?

There is part of each of the brothers and the father in every one of us. This parable calls us to become aware of all those parts of ourselves - to pay attention to our selfishness, our bitterness and anger, and all the longings we carry.

This parable also directs our attention to God who treats us the way the father in the parable treats his sons. So much emphasis is placed on the father's welcome of the younger son, but the father actually responds to each of his sons in a similar way. He goes out to meet each of them to draw them into a feast.

The father sees the younger son when he's still far off and runs to embrace him, crossing the threshold of his house to welcome his son home. He runs, he doesn't walk, doesn't cross his arms and sit there waiting to be told he was right all along. He hikes up his robes and runs. What was lost is found, who was dead is alive, get him what he needs and let's celebrate! Compassion and love are given most extravagantly. The father crosses that same threshold again when he leaves the party to go out and plead with his older son to come in and celebrate. The father, who saw the lost son off at a distance, also sees this son who never strayed far from home. He hustles out for both of them. He meets both with compassion and love saying to the older, "All that I have is yours".

It turns out, the father is the real prodigal in the story. The word prodigal means to be extravagant, excessive and lavish. So, actually, both brothers are a bit prodigal. The younger son is extravagant with his recklessness and self-indulgence. The older son displays excessive anger. Yet it is the father who is the most extravagant, excessive and lavish - prodigal with his love and welcome.

And that is how our God is. God's prodigal welcome is for each of us, for you. God has come, in Jesus, to embrace us. God, in Jesus, has crossed the threshold of heaven to overcome the distances we create to welcome us and draw us into a feast.

God has also come in Jesus to bring reconciliation between people - that is God's deep longing. Even when that hope still seems far off, even when bitterness leads to separation, even when those you long for seem far gone, they are beloved of God, as are you. God will not give up on them and God will not give up on you. God keeps watching, welcoming, pleading and rejoicing in us.

And today our prodigal God comes to you to embrace you, every part of you, and draw you into the feast. You are found, you are given new life.

Thanks be to God