

“Growing Together In Love and Peace”  
 (“Reckless”)  
 November 6, 2022

Luke 15:11-32

The weather has been strange and unseasonably warm for a number of days now. Which has been great in a lot of ways. Although I have to say it’s given some of the leaves on my property incentive to cling harder to their trees. At this rate, I’ll be raking and leaf blowing right up to Christmas Eve.

In any case, in a typical year early November is the time we start to gear up for colder temperatures. We put away our summer and early fall clothes, most of us at least, and we rotate our closets and our drawers so we can easily get to the sweaters and long pants and warmer coats. Temptation may be only a few steps away on the wall, but given the price to heat our houses this winter, we’re trying to hold out as long as possible... resisting the urge to walk over to the thermostat and turn it up even a few degrees.

When we turn the page to this month on the calendar, we can see Thanksgiving looming right around the corner. And even though we hardly need any reminders given all the catalogues we get in our mailbox and the ads starting to pop up on tv’s and computers, the normal chill in the air is a surefire signal that Christmas isn’t far behind...

Somehow it feels like the Parable of the Prodigal Son fits right into this season and this time of year. The Prodigal Son story feels as familiar to many of us as a warm fire in the fireplace and as cozy as a lap blanket when you’re sitting on the couch in the living room. We know this Bible story. Or even if we don’t know this Bible story very well or at all, there are enough cultural references and nods to the idea of “prodigal sons” that this parable has a familiar ring to it...

One of the major reasons why today’s story is so familiar and so beloved is the richness of the characters. We start with the younger son who has the sheer audacity to appeal to his father for his share of the inheritance while his father is still alive. Anyone who heard this story back in first century Palestine would have been aghast at such a brazen demand.

While it may be a more common, more accepted practice in our twenty-first century, when Jesus told this parable, his audience would have been rolling their eyes and shaking their heads. Knowing that no self-respecting son would even think about an early share of his father’s inheritance. Much less open his mouth and actually request it. Bad taste, bad protocol, bad etiquette, bad karma...call it what you will, it was simply a bad idea.

Meanwhile, the older son dutifully went about his business on his father’s farm. Every day from sunup to sundown, he worked on various chores. Tending the animals, maintaining the property, keeping everything running smoothly. He was the kind of son

his father didn't have to worry about. Perhaps the kind of son his father might have taken for granted.

In any case, the older son put his head down every day, did what he had to do, and honored his father with his diligent work. Only when his younger brother asked for part of his father's inheritance and then took off for a foreign land did the elder son begin to wrestle with a feeling he couldn't suppress any longer. The human tendency deep down inside to want to keep score. To watch his younger brother's behavior and make note of the impact that behavior had on the daily routines at the farm. Not to mention the impact his brother's behavior had on the mental and emotional well-being of his father.

The elder son was doing quiet mental calculations and subtracting points from his younger brother's scorecard. At the same time, he was steadily adding points to his own scorecard for being the son who held it all together. He was the one, after all, who did what he was supposed to do. The glue in the family system. The loyal, obedient caretaker. With shoulders broad enough to hold everything in balance and keep everything moving.

The only thing the elder son couldn't control was his own father. Because his father spent time every single day staring out the window and gazing across the fields on the edge of the property. From time to time, the elder son would be talking to his father about important matters related to the farm and he could tell his father wasn't really listening. His father would get that wistful, far off look in his eyes and the elder son knew his father was thinking about his other son. Worrying about his other son. Wondering if his other son was ever going to return.

Until the day came when the father was watching out the window and he saw a figure in the distance. The father moved out to the front porch and shielded his eyes from the sun, squinting so he could see a little further and slightly better. Soon, the father realized. The younger son whom the father thought he had lost was finally making his way home. And the father could barely contain his excitement...

In the wake of his scandalous adventures and the trail of wasted fortune and wasted promises left behind in a distant country, the younger son trudged home with all the speed of a dog holding its tail between their back legs. Ready to shuffle into his father's house, fall on his knees at his father's feet and apologize...humbly admitting his utter failure and ready to accept whatever consequences his father had in mind.

The younger son had no reason to expect any mercy from his father. In fact, he was probably anticipating one of those speeches that sometimes fathers are so good at giving it feels like they have them memorized. You know the speeches I'm talking about, right? The "I told you so" speech. With a taste of "what did you think was going to happen" mixed in. And maybe a sprinkling of "what a stupid way to waste all that money" added in for good measure.

The younger son knew he had it coming to him. And as soon as the older brother realized his younger brother was the one in the distance, he waited for the fireworks to begin. This is the day the score is settled, the older brother assumed. My little brother is about to get what he deserves and I'll be somewhere nearby like a fly on the wall cheering my father on.

Much to the shock of both sons, however, what unfolded when the younger brother walked in the front door was nowhere near what either of them expected. "Bring out the best robe I have", the father ordered his servants, "and put it on my younger son." "And while you're at it, grab a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet." It's hard to imagine who was more stunned at this point. The younger son or his older brother.

"Somebody start playing some music and let's do some dancing. Kill the fatted calf so we'll all be able to feast and celebrate. My son, my long-lost youngest son, is home. And I couldn't be more thrilled!"

Are you kidding me? What kind of father does such a thing? The father has no interest at all in hearing his younger son's apology. He won't allow his younger son to kneel before him and grovel for mercy, much less beg for food scraps off the family table. Instead, the father decides to throw a grand party the likes of which the family farm had never seen.

Lost in all the commotion is the older son, who can hardly fathom what he's witnessing. And it doesn't help that his father barely has any time to entertain any of his heartfelt questions. Like "what about me?" "How come I do everything you want me to do and everything you need me to do, plus more than that, and you never affirm me? How come you don't give me any gifts for all the things I do to make it work around here?" This brother of mine, this son of yours, has offended you and stained our family name with his antics and you can't find any way to thank me for toeing the family line...?

It's such an amazing parable. But I want to pose a question this morning that might feel like a new spin on a familiar, beloved tale. How is it that the only person in today's parable more extravagant, more wasteful, and more reckless than the Prodigal Son is the father?

I'll see you blowing through half of my inheritance and I'll raise you a robe and a ring and a fatted calf when you return...offering you, my wayward son, forgiveness and grace and a celebration you never imagined. If the word "prodigal" is defined as "wastefully extravagant", maybe this whole story should be renamed. Instead of the Prodigal Son, maybe the parable should be called "The Prodigal Father..."

What I know for sure at the end of this parable and the end of this sermon is that I want to know a God who acts a lot like a "Prodigal Father." A God who looks out for me and welcomes me with open arms, loving me unconditionally even when I've blown it and I don't really feel like God should cut me any slack.

What's more, I know for sure that I want to be part of a church family like the one we have here at Wapping Community Church. Where we look out for one another. Where we welcome each other with open arms. And where we love each other in the name of God who is like "The Prodigal Father." Even when one or two or ten or all of us feel like we've made a mess of things and we expect consequences and a stern lecture. There's a church home for each of us right here instead. Amen.

