

“Prodigal Dad!”

Sermon Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton

**First United Presbyterian Church
Bellefontaine, Ohio**

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Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

Now, I don’t know about you, but I think it’s STRANGE that this very familiar story which Jesus tells has become known as *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. I mean, REALLY! THINK about it. JESUS doesn’t call it that. The Gospel writer LUKE doesn’t call it that. Even the Good News Bibles you find on your pew doesn’t call it that. In fact, a quick check of seven different Bible translations I have in my office shows that not a single ONE of them call this story which Jesus tells *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. And yet, that’s EXACTLY what its come to be known as. In fact, the Bible never uses the word *PRODIGAL* at all. Furthermore, when you read the whole parable – which most people don’t do, you know...most people tend to stop at the part where the father throws a big part for the son who was lost, but now is found...was dead, but now is alive – but when you read to the END of the parable, you discover that it’s not just the story of ONE son, but of TWO. And when you put the two together, you then discover that, in reality its not so much a story about the two sons at all, but a story about the FATHER...a “*Prodigal Dad*.” How does the whole thing begin? “*There once was a man who had two sons...*”

Now, the word “*prodigal*” of course, is an old English word we don’t use much any more...except, of course, in relation to this story. It originally meant exceedingly LAVISH...or EXTRAVAGANT...or GENEROUS...in the very BEST sense of the world. Which makes it strange that it has come to mean, in most of our minds, WILD...or RECKLESS...or ENGAGING in some kind of IMMORAL BEHAVIOUR. And even STRANGER YET that we good, Bible-believing, church-going people have come to apply it the YOUNGER son...NOT because of what JESUS said about him – Jesus only said that he spent his money “*foolishly*”...but because of what the OLDER brother said about him.. But more about that in a minute.

If for the moment, however, you take the word “*prodigal*” to mean what it originally meant -- EXTREMELY GENEROUS and GRACIOUS...almost to the point of EXTRAVAGANCE – then what I’d like to suggest to you is that it is actually a much better description of the FATHER in Jesus’ story than it is of either of his less-than-admirable sons. Because when you come right down to it, Jesus’ parable is really the story of a man whose love and forgiving attitude toward his children...BOTH of his children...is nothing less than EXTRAVAGANT. Which is PRECISELY what Jesus wants us to understand about GOD and God’s attitude toward US as well. And in order to help us UNDERSTAND that reality...in order to bring it down to a level where we can comprehend it and buy into it...Jesus tells us a story which is, in reality, the story of OUR LIVES.

Okay, so let’s begin with the OLDER brother. He’s most often the neglected one...the one everybody overlooks because they’re so glad to get the stray-away-from-home-having-lived-his-life-in-wild-and-riotous-living YOUNGER brother back home again. But in reality, it’s not until the younger brother returns that we even hear anything about the older brother. But maybe that’s because it’s not until the return of his younger brother that the older brother’s true colors begin to show.

When one of the servants informs him that his long-lost brother has finally come home and his father is throwing a party for him, the older brother becomes INDIGNANT...INCENSED...and refuses to go in and join the festivities. He won’t having any part of welcoming his sniveling, weaseling-his-way-back-into-his-father’s-good-graces brother back into the family fold.

So the father goes out and PLEADS with his older son to come in and join the party. But that only fans the flames of the older brother's anger and he begins to rant and rave. "Look, old man!" he shouts, the veins on his neck beginning to bulge as his face turns beet red and his long repressed resentment begins to show. "I've worked for you ALL these years. I've ALWAYS done what you wanted me to do. I've OBEYED your rules. I've DONE what I'm supposed to do. I've WORKED hard to be the kind of person you wanted me to be. But did you ever throw a party for ME? Did you ever offer to have a barbeque for me and MY friends? Of COURSE not! But this SON of yours," he says in his most condescending, lip-curved tone, "this SON of yours...this sniveling little BRAT who wasted all your money on prostitutes and wild living...comes waltzing back home and what do YOU do? You throw him PARTY! You have a CELEBRATION! You REWARD him, for heaven's sake! Well, it makes me SICK! I'm not ABOUT to come in and join a party. Over my dead body!"

But WAIT a minute! Wait just a cotton-pickin' minute here! Did Jesus ever mention anything about PROSTITUTES and WILD LIVING? NO! Not ONCE did Jesus even IMPLY such a thing. And yet, every movie I've ever seen that's based on this story shows him "living it up" with a bunch of wild women of less than desirable reputation. And every evangelist I've ever heard preach on this passage has chosen to believe the older brother as well...PRECISELY BECAUSE it enables them to jerk the chain of our moral indignation. Which is EXACTLY what pietistic, self-righteous "elder brothers" are ALWAYS trying to do...looking down their noses at other people they think are BENEATH them and trying to get US to do the same thing!

But Jesus will have NONE of it! Do you remember why Jesus told this parable in the first place...why the subject of a "father who had two sons" ever came up to begin with? It was because the pietistic, self-righteous scribes and Pharisees were grousing around about Jesus welcoming outcast and sinners and even EATING with them, for heaven's sake! So he told them this story in the hopes that the pietistic, self-righteous scribes and Pharisees might see THEMSELVES reflected in the mirror of the older brother - REFUSING to be forgiving...REFUSING to be gracious...REFUSING to be accepting and loving and welcoming toward those who find their way back to the "father," knowing they don't deserve it, but begging for forgiveness anyway.

And Jesus told US this story, I'm convinced, in the hopes that WE pietistic, self-righteous older brothers might see OURSELVES reflected in the story as well. You KNOW who the older brother IS, don't you? He is US! He's YOU and he's ME! He's that part of us that always does what we're SUPPOSED to do and RESENTS those who don't. He's that part of us that answers to OBLIGATION and DUTY, yet secretly wishes sometimes WE could get away with a little "wild and riotous living" ourselves! But we're SCARED of that part of ourselves and we don't want to FACE UP to it so we LASH OUT at those who do and feel great MORAL SUPERIORITY over being able to look down our noses at those who "walk on the wild side"...those whose lifestyles.....whose moral weaknesses...whose choices in life...sometimes get them into trouble. It enables us to feel "oh so PROUD of ourselves" because WE'VE done what's right...WE'VE remained pure...WE'VE lived life the way we're SUPPOSED to live while our immoral, reprobate younger brothers have screwed it all up!

Plain and simple, the older brother is that part of us that lives the way we were supposed to live NOT out of JOY or THANKSGIVING or HAPPINESS, but because it's our DUTY...our OBLIGATION...our RESPONSIBILITY. And translated into religious terms, he's that part of us that goes to church on Sunday morning because we're SUPPOSED to go...not because we WANT to go. He's that part of us that convinces us we OUGHT to teach Sunday School...we OUGHT to serve on the Board of Deacons...we OUGHT to help with the youth group...we OUGHT to give to the One Great Hour of Sharing - not because we WANT to...not because we want to rejoice and celebrate and give something back to God for all the many blessings God has given first to us...but because we OUGHT to...because it's our DUTY...because it's what we're SUPPOSED to do. And the older brother is that part of us that secretly...deep down inside...hopes God will PUNISH all those "younger brother types" who AREN'T living the way they're supposed to live when WE ARE...or so we like to think!

But wait a minute...WAIT a minute...WAIT a minute! Before we go bad-mouthing the OLDER brother all day long, let's remember that it was the YOUNGER brother who caused all the trouble to

begin with...now wasn't it! After all, the OLDER brother was the one who stayed home and did what he was SUPPOSED to do. And what's wrong with that? It was the YOUNGER brother who went off and squandered his life away 'til he was eating slop with the pigs in the pig pen of life. And if you don't get the implications there, to the Jews to whom Jesus was originally telling this story, pigs...hogs...swine were as nasty and unclean as you could get. And to say that the younger son was not only TENDING the pigs...but EATING with them in their own slop...well, it was tantamount to saying he had sunk as low as low could go – physically, morally, righteously, socially. So let's not go running the self-righteous OLDER brother down while we put the YOUNGER brother on some kind of pedestal. Neither ONE of them, Jesus would have us understand, is anything to shout about.

Well, the YOUNGER son tells us who HE is right at the very beginning of Jesus' story. *"Father, give me what is mine NOW!"* Now, in a culture not totally unsimilar to our own, where you generally don't receive your inheritance until AFTER the person you're inheriting from is dead and gone, such a request was tantamount to the younger son saying to his father, *"To the devil with you, old man! You might as well be DEAD for all I care! Give me what's coming to me NOW, cause I'm out of here!"* In other words, it was the ULTIMATE slap in the face...the ULTIMATE rejection of his father...the ULTIMATE turning of his back on his old man.

And then he goes out to the bright lights of the city and HOWEVER he does it, he wastes everything he's gotten from his father...ALL of his inheritance...ALL of his blessing...in reckless living. And once that has happened, the bottom drops out of his life as economic hard times hit the land and he has no reserves...no resources to fall back on and becomes utterly destitute...to the point he became willing to eat the slop he was feeding to the pigs. But unfortunately, no one would let him have even that!

Now, you KNOW who the younger brother is, don't you? He's that part of us that may KNOW what is right...that may KNOW what we're SUPPOSED to do...that may KNOW how we're SUPPOSED to live...but sometimes, in spite of all that, says, *"To heck with it all! I'm gonna live life on MY terms, come hell or high water. I'm gonna do what I want to do, not what somebody tells me I'm SUPPOSED to do. All my fuddy-duddy older brothers can live with their duty and obligation...their rules and regulations all they want. But not ME! I'm going to ENJOY myself! I'm gonna do things MY way, and I don't care WHO gets hurt in the process."*

Of course, none of us ever says that outright! Of course not! We wouldn't be so foolish! But that's the way we end up doing things anyway because the younger brother is so much a part OF us. He IS who we are...just as the pietistic, self-righteous OLDER brother is a part of us too...although, if the truth were known, I imagine most of us have a lot more of the OLDER brother in us than the YOUNGER brother. Most of us are much more *play-by-the-rules, live-the-way-we're SUPPOSED-to-live-people* than we are *to-hell-with-it-all, throw-caution-to-the-wind* kind of people. Which, of course, makes us sit in pretty harsh JUDGEMENT of the younger brothers among us...even the younger brothers WITHIN us. What was it the Apostle Paul said in the 8th Chapter of Romans: *"I know what I'm SUPPOSED to do, but I can't DO it! I know who I'm SUPPOSED to be, but I can't BE it! What a lousy, rotten person I am!"* To be sure, the OLDER brother is always looking down his nose at the YOUNGER brother...among us...or within us.

But what about the FATHER in the story? It is, after all, HIS story, isn't it? The parts about the younger brother and the older brother are simply sub-plots Jesus offers to help us see who the FATHER – who Jesus would have us understand is ultimately God – really is. And who the FATHER...God...really is, Jesus tells us, is a PRODIGAL DAD – offering grace...and mercy...and forgiveness...and compassion...and understanding...and love to ALL of His children – both those of us who are the YOUNGER brother who have somehow lost our way in wild, reckless living...as WELL as those of us who are the OLDER brother who have ALSO lost our way in pietistic, self-righteous judgment of others.

I call him PRODIGAL because he is EXTRAVAGANT...LAVISH...almost to the point of RECKLESSNESS...in his gracious, generous love for us all. And I call him DAD because that's what Jesus says God is like when it comes to his children...like a dad who, no matter what his kids are like...no matter how far they wander in the far country...no matter how judgmental or self-righteous

or pietistic they may sometimes act...they are STILL his children. And though he may not always LIKE what they do...though he may not always APPROVE of their behavior...God can't HELP but love them none-the-less – YOUNGER brother and OLDER brother alike.

So no matter WHERE you stand in this grand mixture we call the Family of God, take a good hard look at the FATHER in Jesus' story. There he is, standing with arms outstretched, inviting BOTH his wayward children into the celebration of His love. Oh, he's not naïve...or blind...or stupid. He KNOWS our faults. He UNDERSTANDS our weaknesses. He RECOGNIZES our failures. But he LOVES us, none-the-less. And in that sense, he is PRODIGAL...prodigal to the point of EXTRAVAGANCE! Extravagant in GRACE...extravagant in MERCY...extravagant in FORGIVENESS...and MOST of all...extravagant in LOVE. And THANK GOD that he is! Thank GOD that he is! If only WE could be more like our Prodigal Dad!

Will you join me in prayer:

Thank you, Prodigal Dad, for being who you are...and for loving us in spite of who we are. Whether we are the younger of your children off wandering in a far country away from you...or the older of your children, standing out in the fields of our own self-righteousness, refusing to come and join the celebration of your grace and mercy...you love us still. And we are grateful. We are grateful, Lord.

We know you don't always like the way we act, Prodigal Dad, and call on us...encourage us...plead with us to change our ways. But we know you love us none-the-less. And for that, we are so very grateful...and humbled...and reminded of your extravagance...and our oftentimes LACK of extravagant grace toward others. Help us to be more PRODIGAL, Dad! Help us to be more like YOU. In the name of your gracious and loving Prodigal Son Jesus, we make our prayer. Amen...and Amen!

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