

18 March 2007
Lent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Who’s *Really* Prodigal?”

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today, in the Holy Gospel, we heard once again the Parable of the Prodigal Father. The story of how extravagant and excessive a father was . . . with . . . his . . . sons . . .

What?

Do you think I misspoke? Oh yes, I am aware that this parable is most often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I think it is misnamed. Because I simply don’t think it was the younger son who was the *most* “prodigal” in this parable! (Even though he’s the one we tend to focus on the most.) I think it was the father. *And I want you to think that too.*

But to understand that, you need to know what the word “prodigal” means. It’s not a word that we use frequently anymore, and what usually happens with such words is that we *assume* we know what they mean . . . even if we really don’t! And so it is with the word *prodigal*. In the minds of many, it is a word which means wasteful, or wayward, or sinful – because, obviously, that’s what that son was. But it really isn’t quite that specific a word. It’s the word from which we get our word *prodigious* – which means excessive, or extravagant, or just plain *large*. And it could be used in *either* a negative *or* a positive sense. Negatively, as in extravagantly wasteful; or positively, as in excessively generous.

Now clearly, the younger son was prodigal. One of those people who seems to go overboard with everything he does!

He wants his inheritance *now* – he doesn’t want to wait!

He sells it to get the money from it now – so he could use it *now*.

He wants to see the world – and so travels to a far country.
He lives *recklessly*, we are told – which, perhaps we could understand as living for today, living for the moment, with no thought of tomorrow.
So that when tomorrow comes, he does not have what he needs. He has taken the good gift of his father, and wasted it.
Yes, clearly, he was prodigal. He was *living' large* . . . until he could do so no more.

But what about the older son? Was he not *prodigal* also? Not in the same sense, of course. Perhaps we could call him *prodigiously prideful*. Or *prodigiously self-righteous*. For he was the “good son.”
He was careful and thrifty.
He would *never* think to do what his useless, no good, two bit, spoiled, over-indulged, poor-excuse-for-a-human-being, brother did!
And his father should be grateful!
Yes sir! That at least *one* of his sons turned out good!
Prodigious, no? So full of himself!

Or perhaps instead of prodigious, we should call these two sons **pig-headed!**
The younger pig-headed in his vice; the older pig-headed in his virtue.
The younger insisting on his sin; the older insisting on his goodness.
The younger eagerly bellying up to the trough, and wallowing in the sin of the world;
the older prudishly insisting there's no mud on him!
Two brothers who couldn't be more different.
Two brothers who couldn't be more alike.

And like us. For can't you see yourself in both of these sons?
Or – perhaps better – can't you see both these sons in you?

Like the younger, pig-headed in your sin, wallowing in worldly ways, returning to the same ol' troughs. Turning away from your Father; wasting His gifts, or taking them for granted. Pursuing only a full stomach, a full house, or a full life. Perhaps for us gathered here today this is true to an extent physically, but even moreso spiritually.
Wasting
the gift of our Father's Word that stays unread all week;
the gift of His forgiveness that we refuse to give to another;
the gift of His mercy which we hoard and do not share.

But like the older son also – pig-headed in pride and self-righteousness for being *better* sons. Choosing not to see our sin or (at least) insisting that *we* haven't wallowed as much as the next guy! Proud of the few times a day we manage to resist temptation, and thinking what great progress we're making when we do. Looking down at others and thinking that *we're* deserving of praise.

What must our Father think of us!

Well, we don't have to wonder – but turn to the father in this parable. **The father who is the most prodigal of all** – the most generous, most extravagant, most excessive, most giving.

Loving his younger son, even when this son wishes he were dead so that he could have his inheritance *now*.

Loving this son even when this son doesn't want his father's love, but wants to be treated as a hired hand. The father simply can't do it, but welcomes him home with hugs and kisses and gifts and a feast – like welcoming home a hero!

And loving his older son, even when this son thinks he is stupid and gullible and unfair. When this son doesn't want his father's love either – but wants to see his righteous anger and wrath!

But he is not what either of his sons wants. He is a *prodigal* father! Overflowing in love, forgiveness, mercy, patience, kindness, and goodness. Whose very nature it is to give. Even to pig-headed sons prodigal in sin. Even to sons who do not deserve it. **Even to us.**

And this *prodigal* father, Jesus wants you to know, is your Father. Your Father who is prodigal in His love for you! Even to the point of giving His own Son for you. His own Son to jump into the pig sty of our sin, and the pig sty of our self-righteous pride, to rescue us. To go to the slaughterhouse for us, that we who rightly deserve to be the devil's bacon, might instead return and receive a hero's welcome – the hugs and kisses and gifts **and forgiveness** of our Heavenly Father. Our Father who even throws a feast for us here, as we return every week. Giving us the life of His Son in

the body and blood of His Son. That we eat not the world's deadly slop, but our Father's life-giving food. That we be not like the younger son *or* the older son, but like the *only* Son.

And so Jesus came.

And hung out in the sty with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners like us.

And hung out in the sty with the Scribes and the Pharisees and the self-righteous like us.

And hung out on the cross for us all.

To show us our Father's prodigal love.

That we might return, repent, and receive.

And so we did again this morning: *O Almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner . . .*

But before we could even get all the words out, our Father was here for us!

Treating us not as we deserve.

(Maybe not even treating us as we *want* Him to treat us!)

But in love and joy, welcoming us back as sons. *His* sons.

Overwhelming us with His love and forgiveness.

For as prodigal as we are, He is even more.

As great as your sin, the blood of Jesus, shed for you, is even greater.

And Jesus wants you to know.

He wants you to count on it.

You can't out-prodigal the prodigal!

You can't out-sin your Father's forgiveness.

Repent, return, receive.

Welcome home!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.