



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

2 Poland Manor
Poland, Ohio 44514
330-757-1547

March 6, 2016

A Lenten Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

The Saga of the Second Son

Luke 15: 1-2, 11-32

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

11 Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with* the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”* ²²But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.*

25 ‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the

fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.”²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.²⁹ But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”³¹ Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” ’*

The Prodigal Son is one of the best-known parables. “A man had two sons....” The story takes its name from the behavior of the “second son,” the prodigal. Most of us are familiar with this ancient story, having learned it in Sunday School. I remember the simple lessons that I learned in Sunday School from this parable:

- Don’t be a prodigal.
- You shouldn’t ask your parents for what is yours.
- You shouldn’t run away to a foreign country.
- You shouldn’t spend all of your money on “dissolute living”, (and few of us ever quite knew what “dissolute living” was).

Why, because it never ends up good. You will end up slopping pigs and pretty soon you will get homesick and realize how good you had it. Then, you will want to go home, and maybe, just maybe, your parents will be like the father in the parable. But there are no guarantees. Bottom line: Don’t be a prodigal. He didn’t realize how good he had it, and neither do we.

I fear that our Sunday School lessons got it wrong. When Jesus originally shared this parable, I don’t believe he was telling his listeners, “don’t be like the prodigal.” Nor do I believe that his listeners would be ones who had lived the life of a prodigal. No, Luke introduced this parable by describing Jesus’ audience. They were scribes and Pharisees. They were the respectable religious folk of the day. They were the pillars of the religious establishment: the ones who could be counted on for support. They were the ones that no intelligent rabbi would want to offend.

They were also angry with Jesus. They were grumbling, “He spends his time with sinners.” And when we hear that complaint about the unworthy, we need to add, “He doesn’t spend enough time with us, the righteous ones.” “He spends time with ‘them’, not us.” Jesus was not addressing this parable to returned prodigals. No! Jesus was speaking to “older brothers.” He was speaking to the ones who stayed with the father. He was speaking to the ones who never left, and if they did, it was but for a short time and they never got involved in “dissolute living”.

The *Prodigal Son* was not addressed to prodigals. It was for older brothers. It was addressed to religious people who were upset that Jesus was not paying enough attention to them. “He eats and drinks with sinners.” They like the older brother were in a snit because they didn’t get “credit” or appreciation for their faithfulness. Perhaps we have misnamed the parable... it is not about the prodigal. It is *The Parable of the Older Brother, for although he was the first-born, he often feels like “the Second Son”*.

It is a story that is repeated today, but we usually treat the older brother as the victim in need of vindication. We cloak it in different rhetoric, but it is the same story.

- We tell it in terms of fairness. “Life is unfair to those who live by rules.”
- We tell it in terms of accountability. “We need to hold people responsible for their actions and decisions.”
- We tell it in terms of reward and punishment. “People should not be rewarded for poor behavior.”
- We tell it in terms of probable outcomes. “He will just do it again.”
- We tell it in psychological terms: “The father is practicing enabling behavior.”
- We tell it in terms of economics. “Once again the ‘maker’ supports the ‘taker’”
- We tell it in terms of church life. “The minister spends all his time with and we know they don’t support the church as much as we do.”

It is a story that is repeated again and again these days, but always with a harsh judgment on the prodigal. Often with grumbling and anger, we seek justice for the

older brother, because we are, in truth, like him. The story is replayed every Easter in our churches. We are the ones who are here every Sunday. We are the ones who do all the work, go to all the meetings... and then on Easter, we can't find a parking place, and some returning prodigal is sitting in our pew!

I believe that the scribes and the Pharisees were attracted to the teachings of Jesus. They spent time listening to him. They liked his originality and they certainly appreciated his piety. But this is where they parted company with him. Jesus was too soft on sin. Jesus proclaimed a God who wasn't fair, (especially to "older brothers")—a God who was not fair to righteous and faithful ones. They objected to the idea that God might be like the father who, with arms open, would run to greet the returning ne'er do well. What about them? They believed that the God of Jesus condoned irresponsible behavior, and would not hold people accountable for their actions. They objected to a gracious and forgiving God. The human inclination is to object to grace in all its forms, preferring a just and fair God. Grace is not about fairness. It is about mercy, forgiveness, healing, and love.

The Scribes and the Pharisees liked Jesus but they drew the line on his message of grace. They believed the God of Jesus did not hold people accountable and took their faithfulness for granted. The God of Jesus was too gracious. He ate and drank with sinners.

If the truth be known, most of us are like the *Older Brother* and his saga is our parable. We, like the scribes and Pharisees, are attracted to Jesus, but we are troubled by his God who is gracious, loving, and welcoming sinners.

A while ago, I did a study on this parable with members of my congregation. They all knew the story, but as we began to discuss it and analyze it, they began to share their discomfort with it. The father was not a good father. He should have put more conditions on his son's return. They didn't like the way the older brother was treated. Bottom line: the story is not fair. Perhaps that is the nature of the grace of God.

The parable concludes with the father throwing a party for the prodigal. The older brother was invited to celebrate too. I wonder if he attended. We don't know. Once again we have an open ended story. Grace... there are no guarantees regarding the behavior it engenders.

The home in this parable is the party, the banquet that the father holds. That is how Jesus described heaven, our true home: a great feast! Will the older brother come home?

And so we are left with the same question for us: We, too, are invited to the party thrown for sinners. Will we grumble about the fairness of God, or will we attend and join the celebration? Will we live by grace and come home? Amen.