

The story of the prodigal son is one of the most recognizable parable in Luke's gospel, and is unique to Luke. We seem to know the story quite well, and it seems we reserve the word 'prodigal' just for this story, though it does not appear in the text. 'Prodigal' means; spending of resources freely, perhaps recklessly; wastefully extravagant; to give on a lavish scale. The apple does not fall far from the tree in this story, as it is also a story of a prodigal father, though he spends differently: lavishly still, perhaps recklessly, shares his love and is extravagant with his grace.

Let us pray.

Lord, God, anoint us with your Word, and send us out to share the good news we have received. Through Jesus Christ, who is with us always. Amen

The story of the prodigal son. You likely know it well. So let me ask, why did the prodigal son end up in the pigsty? What was the cause of his hunger? It is quite obvious. He squandered his father's wealth until he had nothing, not even food to eat. New Testament professor, Mark Allen Powell, asked this same question to a group of seminary students in North America and, unsurprisingly, they came up with the same answer: He was hungry because he foolishly spent his money (see verse 13). From our cultural perspective which emphasizes individualism it seems obvious it was the son's own fault he was hungry. In 2001 Powell had the opportunity to teach in St. Petersburg and asked Russian seminary students the same question: Why was the prodigal son hungry? The vast majority of them answered, it's obvious, he was hungry because there was a famine in the land (see verse 14). These students in Russia were third and fourth generation survivors of Russia's great famine in which an estimated five million people died. Interestingly, while in Tanzania, the professor again asked the same question. The Tanzanian

seminary students pointed out the obvious. The majority of them said the prodigal son was hungry because no one gave him anything (see verse 16). In a culture that values community over the individual, it was the fault of the community that the prodigal son was hungry. So which students were correct? Which culture had the proper interpretation?

In our book study of *Freeing Congregational Mission*, the reading this past week invited us into an understanding of ‘Cultural Humility.’ To be clear, such humility is not to have a lower view of one’s culture – just a more accurate one. Culture humility takes “the ability to recognize and appreciate patterns of culture difference and commonality in one’s own and other cultures and adds to it the heart of a learner.” It is asking the question what am I missing, what can I learn? It means valuing another’s perspective while not devaluing one’s own. An ethnocentric student would argue as to why their perspective was the correct one. Cultural humility would lead the student toward understanding additional correct perspectives, enabling one’s own perspective to be expanded. The prodigal son was hungry because he squandered his wealth, and because there was a famine, and because no one helped him.

The prodigal son is obviously not innocent of wrongdoing. In his culture, asking his father for an advance on his inheritance would have been akin to wishing his father were already dead. It was a request that would have brought shame to his family. Equally absurd was his father agreeing to the request - another opportunity for the family to be shamed. Nonetheless the son gathered his inheritance, left for a distant land, a culture outside his own. And soon thereafter wasted everything. His timing was horrible, because a famine simultaneously struck the land. As a Palestinian Jew, the worst job he could imagine would be to work for a Gentile,

worse than that would be to work for a Gentile to care for unclean pigs – yet that was the job he landed. While hard at work he had a spontaneous daydream wishing he could eat the slop he was feeding the pigs. He realized he could not afford the slop. No one offered him any help; he had hit rock bottom.

Perhaps you know someone who has or you have been here yourself; this bottom place. Though not spelled out in the text, those first century readers would have recognized the prodigal bottomed out before he left the family farm. He walked away from family, he left behind the only friends he knew – neither texting nor Snapchat to remain in touch. Like all of us, he was created for community, but he decided to go it alone. Unlike this year’s March Madness broken brackets, it was a sure bet that this top seeded kid was soon going to lose.

His culture was full of customs, and many of those customs had formal guidelines. The son realized that he left his father with limited options. Because he left home the way he did, his father would have been expected, it would have been custom, for him to disown his son. It was really the only way for his father to save face. The one other possible way would be for the son to return home having multiplied his family’s wealth, and the son didn’t even own the slop he was feeding the pigs. Cut ties would have been the cultural custom.

This week we witnessed our own cultural custom play out in the process of the Senate questioning a Supreme Court nominee. If you have any invested interest in this process, you can likely relate to the shame felt by the prodigal’s father. Perhaps we should celebrate that the candidate was not rushed in prior to a pending election, nor was the nomination ignored until a future election. But if you witnessed some of the visceral questioning, there was little to celebrate regarding

the proceedings. Even prior to the proceedings, the cries against the spoken commitment to nominate an African-American woman were certainly not echoes of prior centuries' cries against the unspoken commitment to nominate a White man. And the question, "Are babies born racist" seemed to be a question meant to intercept or prevent a more viable question, are babies born with privilege or without privilege?

The father should have simply shunned his son. Luke tells us, "while the son was still far off, his father saw him." The father should have gotten on with his life but we get the sense that he woke each morning looking toward the horizon, longing for the return of his lost son. He cared not about the cultural norms, he cared about his son. So when he saw his son on the horizon he gathered his robe, threw caution to the wind, ran like a child to his son, embracing and kissing him before his son had a chance to say a word. Commentators point out that father should not have exposed his ankles while running. He should not have ran. He should not have publicly embraced and publicly kissed his son. He should not have forgiven. He did not care about these 'should nots' – he cared about his son.

The father should not have given the prodigal his best robe, certainly not the ring, nor the sandals nor the party – and the older son knew this. Before we are too hard on the older son let's remember, he's the one who held his father together when his little brother skipped town. Woke every morning to find his father scanning the horizon, daily reliving the betrayal. This older son is the one who spent his life playing by the rules. Perhaps you know someone like him, or can relate yourself. He worked toward deserving everything, including his future inheritance. He is the one whose anxiety wakes him in the middle of the night, knowing that the

family business is weighing heavily upon his shoulders. He is likely the very one who fattened the calf that was sacrificed to celebrate his brother's return.

He has worked so hard, earned so much that grace is beyond him. Conditional love he understands, but his father's love is a bit over the top. He remains upset with his brother for wasting the inheritance from his father. He is upset with his father for wasting his love on the prodigal, because for the elder son who is prepping to take over the family business everything in life is becoming transactional: Cause and effect; give and receive; supply and demand. As if you should give to receive; you work to earn; you care to be cared for; ultimately, you love that you may be loved. This elder doesn't know what to make of grace, which is given so extravagantly by his father. He can neither wrap his mind nor his heart around the absurd love his father displays. Though the distance may differ from that of the prodigal, this elder son separates himself from his father, silently protesting the party.

His actions were more culturally acceptable than those of his brother, but his father could not have cared less about such perspectives because he cared more for his sons. Just as he chased after the prodigal he slipped from the party so he may encounter his elder. Offering again this extravagant grace and unconditional love. On this fourth Sunday of our Lenten journey, it really doesn't matter which of these sons you identify within yourself: whether you have gotten it all wrong, or gotten it all right – or anything in between. What matters is love awaits you, and grace will chase after you. And you are embraced; extravagantly, lavishly. For you belong to this culture of love, this culture of grace.

In the name of the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.