

Sermon Notes March 31, 2019 **Focus** The Father and Two Sons” aka “The Prodigal Son”
Lectionary Readings http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Lent/CLent4_RCL.html

The prodigal is such a great story that is almost as well known as the Good Samaritan. I want to state the obvious right off the bat -- there was neither a real father, nor two real sons. They were plot devices in this story.

If you want real prodigal stuff, there is a fresh air episode that interviews a family turned upside down by drug addiction - especially through meth. The episode is an interview with a father and son - a prodigal and father. The dad wrote a memoir called *Beautiful Boy*. The dad is an unabashed atheist, but I found his journey with prayer fascinating <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/19/658781285/father-and-son-behind-beautiful-boy-share-their-story-of-addiction-and-recovery>

Jesus' storytelling

Jesus' style draws you in with personal and contextual details so that you are rocked along by a great story until he gets you with a zinger. It's tempting for me to try to be original, fresh and exciting with this story. But I am just going to try to tell it as unflowered as I can. Timothy Keller's *Prodigal God* already beat me to that flowery punch. His book is an interesting read, even if he might stretch the metaphor too much. Basically, Keller wants us to see how the word 'prodigal' is misused and how prodigal is more appropriately descriptive of the father in the story.

Prodigal in modern parlance means wayward and lost. It has come to mean one who rolls around in a world of debauchery. Despite Keller's protest, you would not be wrong in calling the younger son the "prodigal". But being linguistically persnickety, the word prodigal means reckless and wasteful.

The father is the real point of the story, the hero and the fool. Keller would say that the father is the prodigal in that he is recklessly wasteful in giving his son the inheritance in the first place, and then recklessly wasteful in welcoming the younger son home.

There are two cultural backdrops to this story you might miss

First, I wish you were dead.

The father is completely out of character for how older men acted. If this were a real person, he would have been incensed by the younger son's request for the inheritance. The younger son had the chutzpah to come up to his dad and say in so many words, "Dad I wish you were dead," because it would be highly irregular for the father to give his son half the estate while the hypothetical father was still alive. But the character hands over the inheritance without comment.

The son coming to his father asking for an inheritance was a clear statement of the contempt he bore for his father. It was like, “give me my money old man, I am younger, smarter, and better than you... I have big plans that don’t involve you-- fool”

In a deeply patriarchal society, it was an insult that would run deep. You can almost imagine those who hear Jesus’ story sucking air through their teeth, with a kind of automatic pained reaction similar to a paper cut. “O no he didn’t” would be closer to our reaction.



Second, old men running

The text says, “he (*the father*) ran and put his arms around him (*the returning younger son*) and kissed him. Old men don’t run. It’s undignified. Dignified, land holding old men never run. The father probably wore a Jesusy robe, like the ones you imagine Jesus wearing, except fancier. The robe would be fitting of a landowner’s elevated station.

To run to the son, the father would have to lift up his robe and run like a bride in wedding dress. It ‘twas undignified and unseemly. (Remember - Jesus wasn’t talking about real father with two sons, but the hearer would have perked upon hearing about this unorthodox prancy behavior). The younger son is actually the reasonable one - He rehearses what he will tell his father “I will just ask to be the hired help and nothing more because I screwed up royally.”

The zinger is the Father’s behavior,

The father is a metaphor for how God is recklessly graceful in dealing with us all.
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time.

We can waste our lives in stupid pursuits (like the younger son), or dutiful misery (like the older son), but God is always inviting both the dutiful and the stupid to join the grace party. God really has no taste, frankly. She keeps bringing weirdos in. *They think she’s a righteous dudette*. That’s what Ferris Bueller’s day off would say about God if we had a 2019 movie reboot.

Both sons have a journey

- The older is no less authentic in God’s eyes that the younger. He just needs his dad.
- The younger is no less dutiful in God’s eye than the older. He just needs his dad.

God wants communion with all of us, where we are. But we can’t stay where we are, we have to come to the house, join the party and get our groove on. **Todd**