



Just How Amazing Is That Grace

a sermon by the Rev. Warren L. Pittman

Texts: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

*Just how Amazing is that Grace
That saves a wretch like he
Who takes his father's legacy
And blows it com-plete-ly?*

Just out of curiosity, I decided this past week to check a definition for the word “prodigal.”

We all know this Sunday’s Gospel story as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” but neither Jesus, nor Luke, gives any title to this – or, for that matter, to any of the story sermons scattered in the New Testament.

Where the titles came from, I really don’t know. They’ve just been there; at least since that first edition of what we call the King James Bible hit ye olde Barnes & Noble in 1611. Right there at the top of the page of Luke’s Gospel on which “Chap.xv” is printed one reads “The loft fheepe, and prodigall fonne.”

Because we’re so familiar with the story, I guess we *think* we know what the word means, but I thought I’d check it out.

Letting my fingers – and bing.com – do the page-flipping, the following appeared as the first result of a quick search.

Definitions of prodigal (adj.)

1. extravagantly **wasteful**: spendthrift or extravagant to a degree bordering on recklessness
2. **producing generous amounts**: giving or producing something in large amounts
3. **wasting parental money**: spending parental money wastefully, but returning home to a warm welcome

Synonyms: *wasteful, reckless, dissolute, profligate, extravagant, uncontrolled ...*

OK, not all that surprising. The definition pretty much fits the character Jesus describes today, at least as the story begins. Of course, the story long predates the word, so the definition-hunt may have been a bit of linguistic tale-chasing, but it did get me wondering.

I wondered about how fair whoever it was that stuck the label “prodigal” into this parable’s title was being to the son in question.

Yes, he takes dad’s money and runs off to be about as “*wasteful, reckless, dissolute, profligate, extravagant [and] uncontrolled*” as one can imagine, but the story has that grace-full twist to it as the young man turns back and goes home.

Rather than highlighting his Prodigal-ity(?) for all time, can’t we be as forgiving as his father, and remember him as “*The Penitent Son,*” or “*The Homecoming Son*”?

Then I remembered a sermon on this parable I enjoyed years ago – and which I think I unapologetically cloned for you all in this very pulpit – in which the preacher went to great lengths to question the so-called penitence of the younger son.

In this morning’s psalm, there is a verse about someone “in whose spirit there is no guile,” but this preacher questioned the “prodigal’s” guile-less-ness.

Quickly to review the “turning point” in the tale, we again read (loosely translated,)

When his debit card was finally refused, and the recession was in full swing, the kid found his pockets, and his stomach, empty.

Panhandling on a street corner with a cardboard sign in his hand, a driver took him at his written word and offered him the chance to “work for food.” He could feed pigs, and he would be free to chow down on whatever the pigs didn’t eat.

He was so hungry that he took the job; but, frankly, pigs don’t leave much in the way of leftovers!

That was it. He knew his father treated his farmworkers better than that, and so he decided to head home.

The preacher then made sure we noticed that the son indeed goes back to the father’s home, but he *never asks for his father’s forgiveness!* The speech he writes does say that he screwed up big time, yes.

To ask for an advance on the half of the estate his father had set aside for him in his will was basically to say, “Dad, you’re worth more to me dead than alive.” Of the top ten ways to burn a bridge behind him, what he asked for pretty much tops the list.

He will “confess” that he disowned his family, but only as his preface to a job application! He plans to say nothing about reconciliation with his father; he will only ask for space in the bunkhouse and a place in line at the chuckwagon!

Do you know the Yiddish word *chutzpah*? If you don’t, try bing.com. Anyway, the kid’s got *chutzpah*, because that’s what it takes to do what he’s doing.

He doesn’t *deserve* the title “Penitent Son,” because he never really repents. And he never sets out to go “home,” only to “three hots and a cot.”

No, I’m afraid he’s stuck with the title “prodigal” for as long as folks are reading Luke’s version of the Good News.

With that, the story continues, and we read that his “job application” is rejected: the father *refuses* to give his prodigal offspring what he asks for.

In fact, the son doesn’t even have the chance to finish his well-rehearsed “non-apology” apology. “Oh, house-holder formally known as ‘Father’, I’ve sinned, and have given up the right to use (more like ab-use) the family name, - “

But the Father stops listening to the spiel, grabs the one he still calls “Son,” buys him a new tuxedo, with matching studs and cufflinks, and orders up a “Welcome Home” party for the whole neighborhood.

And as I listen, I hear something about this “Prodigal” Son that I’ve never heard before.

I realize that the fruit doesn’t seem to have fallen far from the tree: flip-flopping the old adage, here’s as case in which you might say, “like son, like father.” It sounds to me – and, as we hear at the end, it sounds to the other brother as well – that this has turned into a story about a Prodigal *Father*.

What did that definition say about “prodigal-ity”?

extravagantly wasteful: spendthrift or extravagant to a degree bordering on recklessness

producing generous amounts: giving or producing something in large amounts

wasting parental money: spending parental money wastefully, but returning home to a warm welcome ...

Synonyms: *wasteful, reckless, dissolute, profligate, extravagant, uncontrolled ...*

On this fourth Sunday in Lent—this “just over the hump Sunday” of our forty days and forty nights, traditionally a time to “lighten up just a little” on the whole “fasting and self-denial” thing—we listen to a story that is “Amazingly Grace-full” as we hear about a Prodigal *Father* who forgives even before being asked; who will not, perhaps even cannot, un-welcome home a child who has disowned him; and who will “*wastefully, recklessly, extravagantly, and uncontrollably*” celebrate that child’s return, whatever the reason is that has brought him home again.

Of course, there has never been such a father – or even a mother – in any family who has *ever* been that “prodigal.” This *is* just a story after all. None of us have, or will ever know, a father on earth like that.

My father was forgiving, but was comparatively “frugal” with his forgiveness, making sure I learned my lesson, and that I made amends.

Jesus is telling a story: none of us has known such an “uncontrollably forgiving” father on earth as the “prodigal father” depicted in this Gospel. ...

... But shortly we will say some words that “our Savior Christ has taught us,” when we offer his prayer to “Our Father *in heaven ...*”

AMEN.