

INVITED HOME: THREE PRODIGALS SPEAK

Luke 15:11-32
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Rev. Mary Scifres
CdM Community Church

Three men, family to one another, yet relating so differently in the circumstances they encounter. Most Christians know this famous parable of Jesus as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But today, we're looking at this as a story of a Prodigal Family. So many lessons can emerge from this famous story. Sandwiched in with a series of parables about lost items being valued, this parable reminds us that God values us even when we are lost. With unconditional, forgiving love, God always welcomes us back into God's household, no matter how far away we have wandered or how long we've been gone. There's absolutely nothing we can do to separate ourselves from the love of God; any time we want to return to that love, God will welcome us with forgiveness and grace.

But a key to understanding parables is to expect the unexpected and look for lessons we might not notice at first. For instance, the father may have as much to teach us about ourselves as he teaches us about who God is. Yes, this parable clearly shows us how much God loves us, but the father also invites us to think about who God calls us to be as a Christian family and how we are to treat one another in this family, whether the fellow family member has stuck by our side and pleased us at every step of the journey or wandered far and wide for years forgetting we were even here.

Similarly, we have the elder son's story, perhaps a warning to us when we resent newcomers or returning wanderers for their special place in God's home. But his story also reminds us that those of us who remain close to God's house still have a special place in God's heart as a special child and member of God's family. God faithfully loves the faithful, just as much as God faithfully forgives the unfaithful when we return home.

The story of the Prodigal Son is surely the story of a Prodigal Family. Their story is our story, for have we not all been either a prodigal or an obedient child or a loving parent waiting patiently and hopefully for a loved one to return to the fold. And so this morning, I invite you to enter into the worlds of each of these three people. In today's world, family means many things to many people, and if Jesus were telling the parable to us, the characters could just as easily be

three very good friends, three members of a Bible study, or even three sisters. But this morning, I'll portray the characters as a family, a family of women, a mother and her two daughters- struggling with the different roads they have chosen.

The Mother Speaks

I love my family, love being a parent and love helping everyone in this household find their way in the world. But these days, the house seems kind of empty, and I'm not quite as sure about my role as I once was. Did I tell you that my youngest daughter left a few years ago? I thought she just needed a little bit of time and space. She seemed stuck here, said we were suffocating her. So I gave her everything I could give her, including the freedom to go and wander. I don't know what we did wrong. I don't know why we weren't enough for her. But I really she'd be back by now. But she's been gone so long; I don't if she'll ever come home. I wait and wait for my daughter to return. If I knew how to track her down and drag her back, I probably would. Yet, I know that would only push her away further.

*I face the day again, against the window pane,
I remain your closest friend and wish you back again.*

***You wonder how I feel, you think you've pushed too far,
if only you could see this pen scribbling down my heart***

*I'll be waiting, I may be young or old and gray counting the days
But I'll be waiting, and when I fin'lly see you come,
I'll run when I see you, I'll meet you*

I've learned a lot about being a parent and a friend since she left. She'll probably never know how very much she's taught me about waiting patiently, forgiving freely, loving unconditionally.

***And even if you never do return, still I will have learned
how to love you better***

*I'll be waiting, I may be young or old and gray counting the days
But I'll be waiting, and when I finally see you come
I'll run to see you, I'll meet you.¹*

The Youngest Daughter Speaks

I've been gone for a long time. By now, everyone back home has probably forgotten all about me. It seemed like such a good idea at first, striking out on my own, seeing the world, tasting the fruit of life on the wild side, figuring out who I was without worrying about what Mom or any of the family thought. At first, it was a great adventure – visiting new lands, making new friends, exploring new ideas and ways of living. I wanted to find myself, figure out who I was and what I was meant to be and to do. Why am I even here? I thought I could find myself and return home a hero.

But somewhere along the line, I began to realize that being in the family wasn't all that bad. I think I even knew more about who I was when I was with them. Anyway, it doesn't matter now. The best I could hope for would be a place in the servant quarters. Maybe it's time to go back, tell Mom I know that I messed up. I sure don't deserve to live in the house with my sister whose been right there all that time, but maybe I can work with the other servants. They certainly live better than I'm living right now. And I know my Mom, she'd never turn anyone away who needed a place to live and a job to earn a living. Her heart is so big, her love so stubborn, her hope so persistent. I could learn a lot from being back home.

SONG "Stubborn Love"² – VERSE 1 & REFRAIN

*Caught again, your faithless friend;
Don't you ever tire of hearing what a fool I've been?*

***Guess I should pray, but what can I say?
Oh it hurts to know the hundred times I've caused you pain;
The "forgive me's" sound so empty when I never change,
Yet you stay and say you love me still
forgiving me time and time again***

*It's your stubborn love that never lets go of me;
I don't understand how you can stay;
**Perfect love embracing the worst in me,
how I long for your stubborn love.***

Maybe it's time to go home...

The Eldest Daughter Speaks

I've always lived here, always known I was loved, since the day my Mom first held me in her arms for all the family to see, and she beamed her proudest smile at this first born daughter. It's a safe place, warm and comfortable, loving and kind. Mom has pushed me along when I've needed to grow and learn new things, helped me along when I've messed things up. Even now that I'm an adult, I still keep making mistakes, but I learn from them and find new ways to grow. I've figured out who I am, where I belong, and what my purpose is. I'm supposed to be here, working and building this household. I love it here. I love my work, and I love knowing this is who I am and where I'm supposed to be. I learned that here, in this household surrounded by this family who loves me so much. I don't think I could have figured all that out if I were out on my own--like my little sister.

I wouldn't know who I was or how to survive if it weren't for the warm love I feel right here in this very house. Now that my sister is back, it's been hard to know how to react. I mean, Mom had seemed so sad for so long, and it's good to see her happy again. I just start to wonder if she beamed more proudly when my sister was born. Maybe I'm a little jealous. I don't know. I'm just afraid in a way I've never been. Maybe Mom won't want to keep teaching me about the household and how to run the family. What if she doesn't know how to love both of us at the same time? Oh no, here comes Mother now, all smiles. And my sister trailing behind. I wonder if they'll understand what I'm going through...

SONG "Arms of Love"³ – vs 1, 2 & refrain
Lord, I'm really glad you're here.
I hope you feel the same when you see all my fear,
and how I've failed... I fall sometimes.
It's hard to walk in shifting sand,
I miss the rock and find I've nowhere left to stand
and start to cry.... Lord, please help me
Raise my hand so you can pick me up,
hold me close, hold me tighter.
I have found a place where I can hide,
it's safe inside your arms of love
Like a child who's held throughout a storm,
you keep me warm in your arms of love.

*The Prodigals Meet
The Youngest Daughter Speaks*

Hey sis. I'm sorry to have been away so long. I don't expect you to greet me with a big hug or anything. I notice you didn't come to the party. But I am glad to be home, and I want you know how much I admire, how much I've already learned from just seeing you. You've grown and changed. You've managed to find yourself without ever leaving this place. I want that for my life. I want to know the peace and contentment you have.

Maybe if I stick around long enough, I'll understand a little more about this family and Mom's love than I did when I left. Maybe you and Mom can both help me.

SONG "Arms of Love"⁴ - Verse 3 & Refrain

*Storms will come and storms will go,
wonder just how many storms it takes until I fin'lly know
you're here always.*

***Even when my skies are far from gray, I can stay
Teach me to stay here***

*In the place I found where I can hide
It's safe inside your arms of love*

***Like a child who's held throughout a storm,
you keep me warm in your arms of love.***

BENEDICTION

May we know the patience of waiting upon the Lord.
May we know the love that is waiting for us.
May we share that love with those whom we meet
and those who are far away from us.
May we go forth in God's arms of love.

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