

**Sermon**

March 27, 2022

*Four Sermonettes: Reimagining the Prodigal Son*

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Grace to you and peace from God, the source of life,  
and from Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

I wish I could go back.

When I was in seminary studying to be a pastor, we were required to take CPE. CPE stands for Clinical Pastoral Education. We had two options: either you could work with inmates at a local prison for three months, or you could spend those three months working as a chaplain in a hospital. I chose the latter.

During my time as a hospital chaplain, I had many experiences I will never forget. One of them stands out, however. A young woman, 21 years old, had a brain hemorrhage while she was swimming. She was rushed to the hospital, but by the time she arrived, the only thing they could do was keep her alive on a machine. She was brain dead.

When I arrived, her mother and her mother's pastor were standing outside of ICU. I immediately offered my condolences to the mother, who returned a minute later to her daughter's bedside. Having no idea what to say, I turned and spoke with the pastor. And out of curiosity, I asked, "What did you say?"

"Well, it's obvious," the pastor replied.

I waited.

"I told her that God was punishing her for her sins by taking his vengeance out on her daughter."

Now, like many of you here, I was aghast; my jaw hit the floor. I had no idea what to say. But I did know this: what that pastor said was not only cruel, it was wrong.

I wish I could go back.

Well, this morning in a way, I can – not back 20 years ago to seminary of course, but to last Sunday, last Sunday's *Gospel reading* to be exact. You recall I was away last Sunday, but that doesn't mean I wasn't in church! Indeed, I got to hear my younger brother preach at an Episcopalian Church near our hometown as their supply pastor. The Gospel, you may recall, was Luke, chapter 13.

Before Jesus rather inexplicably curses an innocent fig tree, we hear about a conversation he has with those present, about a group of Galileans who had presumably been killed by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of that province.

“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered,” Jesus asks, “they were worse sinners than all the others?”

Here I imagine the crowd pressing in, silent just for a moment, as they eagerly await the rabbi’s answer. “No!” he says, “But unless you repent, you will perish as they did.”

I have never heard that before. Perhaps some of you haven’t either. Did these people die because they were bad? Jesus asks. “No!” he says in response, resoundingly; the answer is no, and it’s right there in scripture. Here Jesus, in accordance with Job and Ecclesiastes, overturns a dominant Old Testament theology that still runs rampant today: “God punishes bad people; only the righteous, the good people, prosper.” If we suffer, in other words, the thinking goes, it’s because God is punishing us.

To us, and to anyone who has been told they or a loved one suffer because it’s God’s will, Jesus delivers not only good news, but *great* news by way of one single word: “No.”

He also teaches us something here. The theologian Catherine Keller names it: “Bad theology,” she says, “the kind that attributes our anguish and our pain and even our death to God, can make suffering worse,” just like it did, I assume, that day in the hospital.

Can you imagine if the pastor had said something gracious to her? Like words I heard once at a funeral of someone I dearly cared for: “God wept.” God wept with her suffering. God didn’t punish her for her sins. God wept that day in the hospital.

God is not the author of suffering. Thank God, Jesus teaches otherwise. Thank God, when it comes to blaming God for our suffering, Jesus says, “No.”

I feel now like I need to thank each of you, as well. Not only did I go back and preach on a reading many of you probably just heard last week, but a few of you may recall the story I shared itself. I told it once before, a few years ago in a sermon, and I couldn’t pass it up after hearing last Sunday’s gospel. I had to go back. As a token, therefore, of my appreciation for you, listening to a rerun, and in my gratitude, I’d like to offer you something *new* this morning as well.

We have all heard the story of the prodigal son multiple times. But have you heard it with these four questions in mind? Listen closely.

Number one: Where is the mother in this story? Have you ever wondered that? Why is she missing? And what would she have said or done upon her son's return? Can you imagine how that might modify the story (or maybe not)? We talk about the Prodigal Son. But what about the Missing Mother?

Second: Why do we call the parable "The Parable of the Prodigal Son"? "Prodigal," after all, means reckless and wasteful as such – isn't it the *father* who is reckless and wasteful when it comes to the love he lavishes upon his son? I mean, he kills the fatted calf and has a huge celebration! Shouldn't we call the story then the "Parable of the Prodigal Father," or the "Parable of the Prodigal Papa Who Gives Away Everything He Has," it would seem, rejoicing out of his son's return?

Number three: Do we really *get* how radical Jesus' teaching is in this parable? Consider the following, more recent story:

A mother once approached Napoleon seeking pardon for her son. The Emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense not once, but twice, and justice demanded his execution.

"But I don't ask for justice," the mother explained. "I plead for mercy."

"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied.

"Sir," the woman cried, "it wouldn't be mercy if he deserved it. And mercy is all I ask for."

"Well, then," the emperor said, "I will have mercy." And he spared the woman's son.

Now if that kind of mercy can come from a human being who was responsible for so many deaths, imagine how incredible, how abundant, such mercy is, coming from the God of Love.

These are three new ways I invite you to hear the seemingly dusty old Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Where is the mother?

Why not call the father "prodigal"?

And do we really *get* the absolute grace and mercy Jesus teaches here through this story?

I have one more, a fourth, and then I'll close: Another title for this story could be the "Parable of the Three Lonely Men."

Think about the isolation of each: of a father without his wife, deserted by his youngest son; a son who spends all he has, only to find himself alone, in pig slop; and an older brother who, like so many in our culture, lives in resentment because someone else got what he didn't deserve.

Then think about how grace, how God's reckless love, breaks through the walls of each character in the story. Where "the sin of separation or estrangement," as one theologian puts it, "is overcome by grace, and the reunion of life with life."

Are you struggling to forgive someone in your life? Saying "I forgive you" is not saying "that's okay," just as saying "bad things happen" does not mean that God caused them.

May all of us be open to seeing the same old texts in new ways, whether in last week's Gospel reading, or in this week's parable.

Amen.