



Prodigal Grace

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Joshua 5:9-12; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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Our journey through Lent continues the theme of healing is with us as we go. I'm interested to see how the readings we have each week seem to be unfolding in an organic way. Seeing things as they are, lamenting, repenting and this week we might hear it as a gospel of returning.

How many of you hold this of the Prodigal Son dear to your heart? It's certainly one of the better known bible stories. The word prodigal translates as 'I drive forth, squander, waste, use up, consume, a prodigal's 'given to extravagant expenditure, lavish, wasteful.'

The stage for the telling of this parable is set: Judgment's being passed on the tax-collectors and sinners Jesus welcomes and eats with. The parable tells of a wealthy landowner with two sons. The father divests himself of his wealth and land to give them in equal share to his two sons. The younger one decides to take his half of the inheritance and leave. He lives lavishly and wastefully until he's used up his share.

Then, when famine descended he was forced to eke out a living feeding pigs, a creature of particular aversion in Judaism. That the pigs eat better than he further compounds the depths to which he's sunk. He has nothing, and then he remembers. Without expectation of restoration he chooses to return home, to his family. The prodigal returns to his father's full bodied embrace, utter delight marked with extravagant celebration.

The constant, tirelessly faithful older brother, the only one tending what remains of the family property, on whom his father and now his recalcitrant brother will depend, is rightfully offended. His presence has never been celebrated with such largesse. The father reminds the older brother of their unquestioned oneness. The younger brother who chose to sever his connection, who was as good as dead, is alive. This prodigal brother's circumstances led him to repent, to turn and to choose to return.

There are different economies at play here: economies of land, inheritance and livelihood as well as economies of grace. Only in an economy of grace could the lost son find his way back to himself and his belonging. The father invites the older brother to see, to join with him in celebrating the restoration to wholeness of his brother and so of them all.

It's a great and comforting story, especially for any of us who've thrown caution and sensibility to the wind and lived 'wastefully' without concern for our impact on those who love us. Redemption is always possible.

Then one day I was at a self-checkout at the Warehouse, waiting while we purchased a couple of items. I heard a conversation taking place between a woman and a staff member. I turned slightly to see. A woman, maybe in her 40's or 50's, with worn but tidy clothing, hair tied back and dignity intact had three children's garments draped across the handle of the trolley. She wanted to pay cash for the items the staff member said totalled \$6.85. The woman had a small plastic zip lock banking coin bag in her hand. She carefully counted out silver coins into the hand of the shop assistant. The bag emptied so she had to reach for another one, with its careful measure of coins. I found tears prick in my eyes, looking around at the abundance being easily and casually acquired, while this woman with great dignity coin by coin purchased what she could for her child, or maybe grandchild. Part of me wanted to leap in and rescue but to do so would have denied her dignity.

The prodigal son story was looping through my head at the time. Observing this interchange it struck me there were some social

assumptions in the parable. What if you didn't have money to return to? What if you didn't know who your father or family was, or it was too dangerous to consider returning there? What if you didn't know where you came from, had no land or identity to return to, or could no longer return to it? How would this parable resonate, would you feel included, or did you need to have these things to be included?

In sitting with my discomfort and my now irritation with the parable, I sought to discern what it spoke, beneath my anger at perceived injustice. I came to recognise I hear it from a place of privilege. I was making assumptions influenced by my worldview, my experience.

I then remembered a gospel music event I went to in Edgartown, Martha's Vineyard a few years ago. The event featured African-American singers and musicians from a range of churches from the mainland. It was an informal worship occasion with a loose playlist order rather than anything formal. Different groups or individuals took the stage in turn to sing and worship. Testifying to their faith, songs were interwoven with outbursts of joyous words of celebration, the music keeping rhythm all the while.

As I listened I heard a theme, a theology emerging that surprised me. I turned to my sister and said, "This faith is upside down to me." Many of them stood within the lineage of those who'd been slaves and many still lived the struggle of racial oppression. Their tears of joy and thanksgiving arose out of suffering. Tears of joy and thanksgiving shed not from being relieved of suffering, but that in their suffering God, Jesus met them. They knew this presence with them, **knew it**. It gave them hope, it told them they were worthy, they weren't abandoned or alone. Who they were, their identity as God's beloved children, couldn't be taken from them, their context couldn't diminish that. They rejoiced.

This memory caused me to look again at this prodigal son story, to look not at the beginning and the end but the middle. Where is the younger son in this parable when he's met in a way that causes him to return? In the field with pigs that are eating while "no one gave him anything." Then we hear "When he came to himself he said ...

here I am dying of hunger I will get up and go to my father.” In the midst of despair he came to himself, he remembers, it impelled him to seek to be re-membered in his father.

It's not when he's better, it's not when he's 'fixed' everything, he has no certainty of his reception but in the desperate intimacy of his despair his heart is opened to receive the gift of coming to himself. And it propels him to return, to a context of provision and sustenance, as he is. He retraces his steps toward healing.

Of the different economies at play here, the economy of prodigal grace is hardest for us to embrace: acceptance as we are, forgiveness and healing.