

THE RADICAL EXTRAVAGANT NATURE OF THE LOVE OF GOD

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 30, 2025

Love. It's not meant to be something merely sentimental; a feeling that may come and go but rarely brings about genuine transformation in individual lives or in society. True love, the love that comes from God and is seen in today's story of the Prodigal Son is supposed to be a radically subversive transformative force, one that often overrides and undermines all lesser systems found in societies; political, social, and cultural.

The grace and mercy seen in this radical love may seem unfair, as it doesn't support and reward only those who are deserving; those who are faithful and righteous; the religious and the pious; those who play by society's rules. No, God's radical love chooses to bless the impious and sinners, rewarding even the undeserving.

Today's story is found in Luke chapter fifteen. After the first three verses it skips over verses four through ten, before picking it up again with verses eleven through thirty-two. These final verses are the story of the Prodigal Son. The verses that were excluded are about a lost sheep and a lost coin.

ALL three of these three stories are about things that were lost and found. All three of them seem out of place with the first three verses that talk about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners and how the

religious leaders responded. But these first three verses tell the same story as all the rest. They are all about things that are lost and need to be found. The entire chapter speaks to the radical extravagant nature of the love of God.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, a man had two sons who would receive their father's inheritance after his death. The story takes three shocking turns; the first occurs when the youngest son, angrily and impudently, demands his share of his inheritance, right away while his father is still alive and kicking. We would never hear of such a thing happening. Such behavior is shocking, and speaks to an irreparable break in the father/son relationship.

The next surprise in the story happens when the father, instead of removing this son from the inheritance, or having him beaten as wouldn't be unusual in that culture, decides immediately to divide his wealth that very day between his two sons; and he divided it EQUALLY: fifty, fifty. Contrary to all cultural norms that directed the eldest son to receive the majority of the family inheritance, the father chose to give this impudent rebellious son, not what he rightfully deserved, nothing; but instead, a blessing; an equal share of the inheritance.

This story demonstrates God's radical kind of love; a love that goes so far as to subvert all human norms and systems. This radical love and grace and mercy demonstrated by the father in this story must have angered and shocked everyone who was present that day.

As Jesus told the story to the surprised crowd, he next told them that this younger son decided to grab up his inheritance and split; he took off for the big city. He went and, over many months' time slowly squandered every last shekel his father had graciously given him; spent it all lavish eating and booze and women and wild parties; many of his behaviors antithetical to the values of his religious upbringing and the values his father had taught him.

As the story played out, after many, many, months, this younger son was broke and desperate. He finally obtained a meager job slopping pigs, a job no obedient practicing Jew would ever stoop to. But even then, this son was still starving to death.

In desperation, and some remorse, he decided to go groveling back to his father, hoping beyond all possibility that his father might take him back as the lowliest of his servants.

I thought about how many people might end this story had they written it based on what is fair and just according to human standards. Here's my attempt. The father had long ago spent the last of his grief over his rebellious son. He sits in his den working on the financial ledgers when there is a quiet knock on the door from one of his hired hands. The servant is admitted and quickly informs his employer that his youngest son, after all these months, was spotted out in the fields walking towards the house. The father's face begins to turn red as he glares at the servant, waiting for further details.

The servant explains. The son is stinking to high heaven and is filthy dirty with scabs on his skin. One sandal barely clings to his calloused torn foot, and he is infested with fleas. The son has returned, asking for a little work, maybe the lowest job washing the feet of guests at the door. The father thinks for a while, and then a smirk spreads across his face. He thinks; well, well, it sounds like my son is finally getting what he deserves! Then he gleefully instructs the servant to clean up his son and have him wait in the servant's bunkhouse until he is summoned. He directs that no one feed him. This son would have plenty of time to think about his shameful behavior and terrible choices.

The landowner goes back to his work on the financial books while he plots how to meet out justice on this son. Later he sits down to lunch with his elder son – the one son, by the way, who had ALWAYS been very faithful and obedient and a hard worker. His mind schemes a plan. Finally late in the afternoon he stands imposingly in front of his desk as he calls in his youngest son to face his judge; face his punishment. The son approaches, not having eaten all day while he watched the other hired hands enjoying their food. It had been many days since he had eaten.

The father instructs that the scraps leftover from the servant's lunch be brought in for his son to eat while his father watches. Eventually his father explains how things are now going to be for this rebellious son of his. The eldest son, faithful and devout, is standing off to the side, proud, with a wide smirk on his face as he joyfully observes his brother getting what he deserves.

Well that's the way the story may have played out. You and I might think that this would have been a just ending to the story. But this is not how Jesus told the rest of the story. And here's where the final shock in the story rippled through the crowd that day. Jesus said that while the son was planning on finally returning to his father's house as a slave, the father had been daily looking towards the horizon, searching for his wayward prodigal son. And then one day he spotted him, he immediately grabbed the hem of his robe, hiked it up above his knees, and took off running for his son, against all propriety.

He did not run in order to deck his son; to lay him out cold in the dirt. No, he ran out of deep compassion and passion and love, to embrace his son. The closer he came, the more he could smell the stench of his child, and see how filthy he was. But that did not matter to this father. All he cared about was that his son had finally returned. He reached out and grabbed his youngest son in a mighty bear hug; embracing the filth; embracing the smell; embracing his dear child.

In that intimate moment, the father noticed that the family ring was no longer on his son's finger. He thought that he must have pawned it. But instead of chastising his son, the father reached into his pocket and pulled out another ring, putting it on his youngest son's finger and called for a celebration – a feast. There was no retribution or divine harsh justice in the father's behavior. As he looked at his repentant son, there was only deep and passionate love in his heart.

We can glean much from this story of a father and his two sons. It is a lesson that can be seen in the rest of this chapter as well; with the lost coin everyone went hunting feverishly for; the shepherd who left the ninety-nine obedient faithful sheep in the field and ran to search for that one lost sheep until he found it. And also in the first three verses of the chapter, when Jesus sat down to eat in the home of tax collectors and sinners; these who were lost as well.

We learn a lot here about God and about human nature. It is within the normal bounds of human nature to see only on the surface of things; to see fleas and filth and stench and a wayward rebellious child. It is human nature to see only tax collecting Jews who have sold themselves out to work for Rome. It is human nature to see only sinners. That was the way the elder son looked at this brother of his. This was how the religious leaders looked at the tax collectors and sinners; unworthy, unredeemable, unholy.

But thankfully the father in this story who represents God, does not see in the ways that society views as right and fair. The father does not see in normal ways of human nature. The father sees as God sees, in deep compassion and love; in radical ways that subvert human society and ushers in the kingdom of God.

God reaches out to us not with a bent towards retribution or justice as we might tend to view justice. God's entire being is love. And in love, God only sees a returning repentant sheep or son. God does not see tax collectors and sinners, but his children. God does not see illegal

immigrants, but his beloved children. God does not see straight or gay or trans or man or woman or homeless or lazy or hardworking or deserving or undeserving or Republican or Democrat. God only sees God's beautiful beloved lost children. And God desires to run after each child, to embrace them, put a ring on their finger and celebrate, for they were once lost, and are now found.