

## Parable of the Prodigal Father

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Luke 15:11-24

Over the years words have entered the English language from French. *Prophet, saint, Baptist, miracle, paradise, sacrament* – all these words of our faith. Also French words that have to do with excess – *prodigy, prodigious, prodigality, and prodigal*. If you are prodigious you may be called a prodigy, meaning that you have ability or talent in excess of others. There is also an excess with prodigality and prodigal, in fact, two ways you can be excessive. A prodigal can be excessively wasteful in spending his money, as was the son in the Luke reading above. Or a prodigal can be excessively graceful in giving love, as was the father.

Dr. Ken Bailey was a Presbyterian missionary in the Middle East. Because things had not much changed there for thousands of years, he went from village to village asking the people who worked the land what impressed them about the Bible stories. Two things emerged repeatedly regarding the Prodigal Son. One was that no father in the Middle East would put up with such a son. When the son said, "Father, give me my inheritance now," it was the same as saying, "Old man, I wish you were dead." No father would take such disrespect.

The second thing was how the father ran to his son when he saw him coming home. In the Middle East a man's social class determined his pace. Servants had to hurry, but not the well-to-do. That the dad picked up his robes and ran to embrace the son simply was not done.

It is said by some that what sets followers of Jesus apart from members of any other religion is our understanding of God's grace. There are religions that have virgin births, religions that have people who come back from the dead, religions with laws that produce a decent way of life. But no other religion understands God in terms of God giving us unmerited love.

And followers of Jesus aren't to just admire God's grace. We're to be dispensers of God's grace.

I once received an early morning phone call from a couple in the congregation. Their son, Michael, a young man in his 20s, had been shot to death. Could I do the funeral? Yes, I could. What happened? At the time they didn't know the circumstances, but in the *Tribune* that evening I read that he'd been trying to break into a mobile home to attack a friend of his, and that the father of the friend had shot him in self-defense. Rather disappointing behavior.

But another young fellow, Pollo, came and told me that he had been in the car with Michael that night. Michael had been drinking and had wanted to talk to his friend in the mobile home. There was a problem between the two. But he was not armed and did not try to break down the door as the former friend alleged. He was standing on the porch outside when the dad shot him in the chest. The impact of the bullet spun him around and knocked him over the railing. The father then came out and ordered the son to empty the pistol into the back of Michael's head. Would I go to the police and tell them what really happened?

I did. Michael's body was reexamined, and what appeared to be a scrape on the back of his head, and therefore unexamined, turned out to be a half-dollar sized spot

into which five bullets had been fired. The father and son were taken into custody, and eventually there was a trial. A tough trial for Michael's parents.

Michael had a rap sheet that stretched from Albuquerque to Las Cruces. He had disappointed his parents time after time, and they had to hear it all again. As the trial dragged on, I was not sure that Michael had not tried to break in, not sure that Pollo had told me the whole truth. At one point the prosecutor began his statement by saying, "Michael was a punk." And this is the guy who is trying to convict the father and son of Michael's murder. Now he was going to add, "But even punks don't deserve to be murdered in cold blood." Still, to call Michael a punk in front of his parents?

Michael's parents sat through all the terrible things said about their son, so far as I could tell, simply because they loved him. (The father and son received minimal sentences.) They didn't support all he had done. They tried to teach him better. But grace had entered their vocabulary via Jesus Christ, and they were going to dispense it to their son in death as in life.

A preacher named Fred Craddock used to check to see if the congregation was paying attention. Preaching about the Prodigal Father he said, "Then after the younger son came home, the father held a party for the older son who had stayed at home and treated the dad with respect." From the back of the sanctuary, a person called out, "That's the way the story should have ended!" Lots of people agree, but that's not the parable Jesus told. Amen