

The Prodigal Son & My Schwinn Bike  
 Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 \*  
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I propose to show that the Prodigal Son is a quintessential story of God's all-encompassing love so that those hearing this sermon will rejoice and put themselves in the place of the wayward younger son and not the older, self-righteous son.

May the God who creates us....

Please be seated.

Good Morning!

How many of us here  
 happen to be  
 the oldest in our family of origin?  
 Hmm  
 today  
 I have some really bad news for us.  
 Or then again—  
 maybe its good news—  
 you'll have to decide.

The "prodigal son"---  
 the prodigal son is to scripture  
 what Charles Dickens is to Christmas literature  
 and what the *Magna Carta* is to Constitutional Law.

The prodigal son  
 is that quintessential story  
 of God's grace  
 that is certain to offend  
 anyone of us  
 who believes  
 that we earn our salvation,  
 anyone of us  
 who quietly believes  
 that our actions enable God to love us.

The "Prodigal Son"—  
 the bare essentials:  
 Two sons, the older a type A—  
 driven kind of guy  
 and the younger son—

sort of a type z.

The Younger son  
 comes to the father and says,  
 "I'm tired of it here—  
 I'd like to see the world  
 get out from under this daily grind—  
 I'd like my share of the inheritance now.  
 Stocks and bonds are fine—  
 cash is even better.

So, the father  
 divides the property  
 between his two sons.  
 The younger takes it all  
 and goes to a foreign land  
 —where by all accounts—  
 he has an exceedingly good time—  
 until the money runs out  
 and a famine finds the land.

The younger son, now desperate to eat  
 —hires himself out  
 to one of the local farmers and pretty soon,  
 what do you know  
 but the good Jewish boy is taking care  
 of somebody else's  
 not too terribly kosher pigs.

While feeding the swine—  
 the younger boy realizes  
 that the "slop ala troth"  
 is beginning to look good.  
 While he may be a cad—  
 he's not dumb—  
 and it comes to him  
 that his father's farmhands  
 eat much better, live much better  
 than he is right now.

So desperate man that he is—  
 he swallows his pride  
 and decides to go home.  
 He reasons,  
 "I'll be a hired hand for my father  
 —but at least

I won't be pushing my way to the troth,  
shoving swine out of the way.

So he makes the long journey back—  
and the father—  
sees him.

The father  
whose face now has had a permanent squint  
and a year round tan  
etched in the folds of his skin—  
because every single day  
he stares into that glaring, setting sun,  
hoping to see his boy  
come back down that dusty road.

And lo on this blessed holy day--  
He sees his wayward son  
long before he's home.  
He sounds the alarm,  
drops to his knees  
in a prayer of thanksgiving.

Stops the business of the farm,  
the chores of the household.  
And puts all of his servants  
onto creating the world's best homecoming.

"Get the ring,  
the cloak,  
the really nice slippers  
the ones by my dresser go get those," He says.

"And food, he's going to need food  
that boy is going to be famished—  
get that beautiful calf—  
the one we've been saving.  
Slaughter it—  
get it on the spit  
and start making  
that bar -b que sauce—  
we're having ribs—crisp, juicy succulent, tasty ribs.

The boy—  
who has been practicing  
what he will say,

for the last 47 miles,  
 "Father forgive me,  
 I've sinned against heaven and you—  
 I'm not worthy to be your son.  
 Just take me on as a hired hand  
 and I'll not be a burden."

Over and over again he says it—  
 each time he finds himself  
 walking slower—  
 because he knows—  
 that this is his one and only chance—  
 and he deserves only to be thrown out on his \_\_\_\_\_.

But as we know  
 as he hesitates  
 at the foot of the driveway—  
 his father comes barreling down  
 and almost plows him over.

Before the young man can even utter the phrase,  
 "I'm a smuck"—  
 his father has draped his shoulders  
 with a beautiful robe,  
 a new ring is on his finger  
 and he can smell the baby back ribs—  
 being roasted on the grill.

Now the oldest son,  
 the one that so many of us—  
 dependable, follow the rules,  
 meet the deadlines, exceed the expectations,  
 kind of folks identify with—  
 -the oldest son,  
 exhausted from his work in the field—  
 asks a servant about all the commotion.  
 The servant replies,  
 "Your wayward no-good brother has returned—  
 and your dad is throwing him  
 the party of the century."

Oh that's not good.  
 And it is here  
 that I flash back  
 to one of those pivotal childhood moments.  
 My 13<sup>th</sup> birthday.

When it became to clear to me  
that I needed a new bike.  
Not just any ordinary bike,  
not a Sears bike  
or a JC Penny bike  
but a bike shop bicycle.  
To be specific a Schwinn varsity  
—with a 27'inch wheel  
and a 20'inch frame,  
rat trap pedals,  
brakes in two places  
and stem shifters.

Now the problem with this bike  
is that it cost \$106 dollars.  
My parents  
were willing to pay \$47 dollars  
because that's what a bike  
at the Post Exchange on the Military Base cost.

But, if I wanted  
the orange Schwinn Varsity  
then I was going to have  
to earn the rest of the money.

Which I did.

I babysat  
every spare moment of my life.  
At 50 cents an hour  
it takes  
many spare moments  
to earn that money.

For six months I worked  
and saved and dreamed.  
A month away  
I put a down payment on the bike.  
Then April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1975  
the feast of my 13<sup>th</sup> nativity,  
my parents and I  
got into  
the Mercury Colony Park wood paneled station wagon—you remember those ...  
and we drove  
to the Colonial Bike shop  
on route one in Alexandria, Virginia.

I was over the moon with anticipation,

for I was a child  
 who viscerally understood  
 the joy of hard work and delayed gratification.

And then—  
 it happened.  
 As I sat in the back seat—  
 my mother casually remarked to my father  
 —“You know Ray—  
 since we’re picking up a bike for Bonnie—  
 we may as well just get one for Kevin too.”

Kevin—Kevin—  
 my brother a mere 15months younger—  
 Kevin never did anything.  
 Kevin barely worked and  
 certainly hadn’t saved---furthermore  
 —Kevin didn’t even know  
 he needed a bike shop bicycle.

But there it was.  
 I got my bike that day—  
 beautiful orange—which I rode everywhere for ten years.  
 And Kevin—  
 he got a lovely green one—  
 that accented his red hair—quite nicely.  
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What do you mean—  
 you’re killing the fatted calf?  
 He hasn’t done a darn thing—  
 and I’ve been working my \_\_\_\_\_ off.  
 No—I will not go in.  
 No I will not celebrate his return.  
 His rebirth—his survival.

Why?? Why pray tell?  
 Because we get confused.  
 We think—we think—  
 that love—like money is earned.  
 We often get confused  
 and think that  
 we are always the righteous ones,  
 the hard-working ones.

We forget, conveniently overlook  
 and find ourselves

unable to face our failings,  
our flaws, our jealousies, and petty ways.

We forget what it means  
and how it feels when we screw up.  
When the world  
drops out from underneath of us—  
because of what we have said,  
what we have done—  
we forget what it feels like  
when someone says,  
“I love you still—  
I love you anyway---  
we forget the power of the phrase,  
“I’ll love you always.”

We forget it—and then we begrudge  
someone else that blessing,  
that grace—that gift.

And who are we—  
my friends—who among us—  
when we sin—  
when we screw up—  
when we fall woefully short of the mark—  
who among us—  
doesn’t hope for someone  
to stand  
at the end of the proverbial driveway—  
waiting and longing  
and praying for our return.

He was lost, She was lost  
And now he—and now she has been found.

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Friends, I’ll take that fatted calf—  
over a Schwinn bicycle—any day.  
Thanks be to God.  
Amen.