

The Prodigal Son & My Schwinn Bike

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 *

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry

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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?
Hmmm
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 13th birthday.

When it became 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 15th, 1975
the feast of my 13th 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 15 months 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.