



Sermon Preparatory Notes

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Commentary 1, by Arland J. Hultgren from *Working Preacher*

There was a time when the lectionary known to most churches of the West did not include the Parable of the Prodigal Son at all, even though it is surely one of the best known of Jesus' parables.

To remedy the situation, it was assigned as an alternate reading for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity (the Tenth after Pentecost, for which the Parable of the Unjust Steward, Luke 16:1-9, was the normal reading) in the *American Book of Common Prayer* (1928 edition) of the Episcopal Church and in the *Service Book and Hymnal* (1958) of major Lutheran Churches in North America.

But the three-year *Revised Common Lectionary* (1992) of today places it in the Season of Lent. It has been transposed therefore from being set in the "green" season of growth in faith and life to the more solemn "purple" season that has a more penitential accent, anticipating the Passion and the Resurrection of Our Lord.

The difference in locales within the church year has hermeneutical implications. If the parable is set on a Sunday in the Season of Pentecost, it takes on a more didactic and evangelic character concerning the mercy of God. But if it is set on a Sunday in Lent, and if one is insistent upon

maintaining the mood of Lent, it can take on a more paraenetic (or hortatory) character concerning the hearers' need for repentance.

While both of these themes can be drawn from the parable, it is the former that is actually more in line with the main thrust of the parable itself. And since Sundays during Lent are "Sundays in Lent," rather than "Sundays of Lent," it is fitting to allow the brighter, less somber, theme to dominate, providing a bit of relief within the Season only two weeks prior to the Sunday of the Passion.

In hearing and studying this parable, one should not give attention only to Luke 15:11-24 – the initial part concerning the wayward son and his homecoming (and so omitting 15:25-32) – to deal fairly with this parable. The reason for saying that is that at the outset Luke says: "Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had *two* sons'" (15:11). In order to hear about both of the sons, one has to go all the way to 15:32.

The parable is framed well with the introduction at 15:1-2. Those verses set up the occasion for all three parables to follow (the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son). Jesus is accused by the Pharisees and scribes of drastically inappropriate conduct: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." The challenge is put forth, and Jesus responds with parables that, in effect, speak of God as one who welcomes sinners. Jesus, in his own ministry, impersonates the divine welcome by receiving and eating with sinners.

The parable – the longest of all parables in the gospels – consists of three scenes: (1) the negotiations of the younger son with his father and his subsequent departure to a foreign country where he is wasteful and becomes impoverished (15:11-19); (2) the homecoming of that son and the welcome by his father (15:20-24); and (3) the interchange between the father and his older son (15:25-32).

There are features of the parable that are particularly striking. Among them are the following:

- (9) The younger son asks his father for his share of what would eventually be his inheritance. That is remarkable, even shocking. Even if ancient law (Jewish or Roman) had provision for doing what the son wants his father to do (which is most unlikely from what we know, based on the sources we have) it is an affront to the father. In the ancient world, as today, an inheritance is

received only at the death of the parent. Therefore the son's request amounts to saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead!"

(2) When the son leaves home for a distant country, he distances himself from his father and older brother not only geographically, but also psychologically. He is, in short, done with being with his father and others in the household.

(3) When the son comes into difficulty, he becomes a servant of a farmer in the far country. The latter is a Gentile, because he has a pig farm. The son is an indentured servant, working for a set number of months or years. Feeding pigs would be in itself bad enough for a Jew, but to consider joining the pigs at the trough is to add degradation upon shame.

(4) The son "came to himself" and decided to go home again. That does not necessarily mean that he had remorse (as in repentance), for the motive given in the text is that he realized that he was better off at home. True, he produces a speech, but does it indicate true remorse, or is it preparation for manipulating his father?

(5) While one can argue whether or not the son truly repents, the focus is on the father's warm embrace. The father has no idea why the son is coming down the road; he does not even speculate about his son's motive. He simply sees the son coming, and he "runs" to meet him (15:20). In ancient times, a dignified man does not run! This is a feature of the parable that is easily missed, but it is highly important. The father does not act like a normal father. The father that Jesus portrays acts out the love and compassion of God.

(6) The son has practiced a speech, saying that he has sinned; that he is not worthy to be the father's son; and that he should be treated as a servant (15:19). But the father will have none of that. He embraces his son, and when the son begins his speech, the father cuts it off abruptly in order that he can give directions to his servants (15:22-24).

(7) While the party is going on in the house, the father leaves it and goes to find his other son, the elder one. He pleads with him to join the celebration, but is unsuccessful. Once again, the focus is on the father. He tries his best to bring about harmony in the household.

(8) The dialogue between three persons in 15:27-32 speaks volumes about how alienated the elder son now is from his father and

brother. He too has, in a sense, gone into “a distant country,” psychologically speaking. The servant tells him that his “brother” has come home (15:27). The elder brother, in addressing his father, uses the term “this son of yours” (15:30). But the father addresses him as his “son” (15:31), and then he says “this brother of yours” was lost but now is found.

(9) There really is no point in going beyond the story as given to wonder whether the father finally prevailed upon the elder brother to join the party. The parable is open ended, and it is best not to try to rescue it to fulfill our own wishes for resolution.

The parable leaves two themes in tension. On the one hand, Jesus illustrates the love of God that is beyond human love as commonly understood and practiced, for no typical father would act as this father does in the parable. On the other hand, Jesus addresses the parable against his critics, vindicating his message and ministry, by which he consorted with the outcast. His critics are illustrated by the behavior of the elder brother, who cannot join in the rejoicing over the lost being found.

The two themes stand on their own, independent of one other. But they have in common something at a deeper level. Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God. His message was about a God whose love surpasses all typical expressions known to humanity. That love is celebrated by those who apprehend it in the gospel of Jesus, as illustrated in the scene of celebration after the homecoming of the younger son. But the expression of divine love also evokes resentment in those who assume that they know all about it and claim to know who is worthy of it, and who is not, as illustrated in the scene of the elder son’s refusal to join the celebration.

The congregation at worship is the place for celebrating the homecoming each week of the prodigals, including all of us, and driving away all thoughts of righteous resentments about who all is coming to dinner. Resentment leads to alienation, going off into a far country of our own making. As the father welcomed the son, so God in Christ welcomes us. That has implications for the life of a congregation. As Paul put it so well, “Welcome one another... just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Romans 15:7).

Commentary 2, by Matt Skinner

Hearing this parable can be like hearing from a longtime friend. Strong memories rush in, and we are eager to resume conversation with a familiar voice.

Those dynamics offer preachers opportunities and challenges. Chances are people already connect to this parable in meaningful ways. They have found their space within it and allowed it to speak to them already. This offers opportunities to build on that preexisting relationship and acknowledge its importance.

The challenge lies in crafting a sermon that lets people discover newness. If we think we already know what the parable is about, or think that it only means a couple of things, then we close ourselves off to its depth. How might we twist the kaleidoscope to allow people to see the parable's pieces arranged in different ways, so people might experience its power even more greatly?

Lost Things in Luke 15

Part of understanding parables involves noting where, when, and how Jesus tells them. This one comes in response to Pharisees and scribes who criticize Jesus' penchant for associating too intimately (and perhaps too raucously) with "sinners."

Actually, Jesus tells three parables. Each involves recovery or reclamation followed by celebration. The first two (15:4-10) declare that finding a lost thing legitimately results in rejoicing. They also equate finding and recovery with *repentance*, an idea that was central in last Sunday's Gospel reading.

By contrast, Jesus' third parable, in 15:11-32, does not include the word *repentance* or any of its cognates. It offers a different answer to the scribes and Pharisees, for the three parables do not simply repeat the same point. The three parables' characters evidence a variety, for the third moves away from society's more invisible members (shepherds and women) and takes us inside a privileged family. Furthermore, this is a much thicker parable, not merely due to its length, but because of its narrative complexity and ambiguities.

That's Odd

Jesus' parables typically include moments of odd behavior. These details seize attention through their strangeness and illustrate the alterity of the kingdom of God. That is, they depict God's ways as alien to our usual expectations and to conventional wisdom. Notice the odd aspects of the interactions between the father and his younger son:

**The son affronts his father.* His request for his part of the inheritance is out of line, perhaps the equivalent of wishing his father were dead. The son could have expected a share of the family estate, a much smaller piece than that due to the elder son, but only upon his father's death. Nothing compels the father to grant the request.¹

**The father appears recklessly indulgent.* Because the son's request would bring such shame to the household, granting it makes the father appear foolhardy, not generous.

**The father appears recklessly credulous.* Dignified men in Jesus' culture would not run like this man does. Clearly the father longs for the son's return, for he sees him "while he was still far off." But by welcoming him as he does, greeting him before hearing a word, the father appears ripe for exploitation. He does not wait for his son to express contrition (only a brief confession) before restoring him to full status in the household, symbolized by the robe, ring, and sandals.

Is this what grace looks like? Is God's grace a grace so eager to give and restore? Will not those who value responsibility and propriety consider it dangerously permissive?

That's a Surprise

We encounter at least two interpretive cruxes. That is, our decisions about what is happening in two places affect our perspectives on the parable as a whole.

First, does the younger son earnestly repent, or is he a manipulative scoundrel?

Some argue that the son's repentance is implied, even if it is not clearly named by the ambiguous expression *he came to himself* (verse 17). After all, he hits rock bottom, longing to eat what unclean animals eat, once he is done in by a trio of calamities: "dissolute living" that squanders his resources, a "severe famine," and a social neglect in which "no one gave

him anything." As signs of contrition, he confesses sin and plans to ask his father to welcome him home as a slave instead of a son. As signs of sincerity, he rehearses his speech and begins to deliver it even after his father embraces and kisses him.

On the other hand, "he came to himself" can indicate that he came to his senses and got clarity on his situation (see Acts 12:11). The absence of repentance language is striking, particularly since the previous two parables condition readers to expect it. The son's rehearsed speech smacks of insincerity and a plan designed to tug at his gullible father's heartstrings. Perhaps Jesus' point is that even scoundrels are joyfully welcomed in God's household. Just pointing oneself toward home is what unleashes God's welcome. Any motive will do.

However we judge the younger son's motives, still the story retains a deeply scandalous flavor in the father's exuberant response to his returned son. The father welcomes home a loser, as a loser, and restores him to his standing as a son. Coming home at rock bottom was all he had to do.

Second, is the elder son correct?

The elder son makes the parable especially complex and interesting. He surprises us by breaking the pattern set by the two parables in 15:4-10. One sheep was lost while ninety-nine stayed together. A woman searched for a coin while holding onto nine. But both sons in this family are lost, including the one who never left home.

As soon as the elder appears in 15:25 we sense his alienation. No one bothered to call him in to join the party! Accordingly, he does not enter the house. He does not address his father as "Father" and speaks to him about "this son of yours" instead of "my brother." His refusal to celebrate stems from his deep resentment.

Why is he resentful? He is taken for granted. No extravagance celebrates his reliable service. He accuses his father of showing preferential treatment. He expresses this with the visceral intensity that such unfairness can generate within family systems. The elder son forces us both to digest just how scandalous are the father's actions and to ask what this son's reactions say to us.

This son cannot see the situation in any way but according to his own conventions of justice and through the torments of the lack of appreciation

he suffers. The father's response to the younger son utterly confound the rules, doctrines, and convictions that confine the elder son.

Is the elder son correct? By his own reckoning, he surely is. And many of us need to be brought to the realization that, deep down, we tend to reckon things in similar ways, according to similar standards of fairness and belonging. How can we not?

Church folk fall into a trap when they write off the elder son as different, an outsider, or especially reprobate and self-righteous. He is the consummate religious insider, for he understands and articulates *the scandal* of God's grace better than any theologian.

The father does not cast the elder son away. The parable denies a zero-sum economics that would have one child accepted and another rejected. "There is no 'Jacob, I loved, but Esau, I hated' (Malachi 1:2-3) note here."2 For the father calls the elder son "son" and confirms his full place and favored standing within the family. All that remains to be seen is how this son will respond.

A Parable for Feasting

Wise preachers will avoid gorging congregations on this rich parable by realizing that they cannot serve up each and everything it offers. I close, then, with a handful of recommendations around any one of which a preacher might construct a homiletical meal.

*Both sons, each in his own way, misunderstand the workings of grace. The younger seeks to bargain or manipulate, while the elder cannot let go of sacred canons and grudges. Yet both are welcomed home, regardless. They call us to reassess our own standards and the basis of our relationship to God.

*The elder son crystallizes questions about who has the rights to enjoy benefits as a member of God's family. Who rightly belongs to this family? Who gets to determine the benefits? Who in God's family remain objects of our disdain?

*The parable focuses on coming home as an occasion for celebration. This gives it an odd but powerful relationship to Lent, given that season's associations with temperance. Next week's Gospel text offers another story about surprising extravagance. Live it up!

*Sensitive preachers will be careful not to romanticize the notion of home. This parable only hints at how messy a place home always is, perhaps never quite what we want it to be. Our own ideas of home usually simultaneously attract and repulse us. Those who have read Marilynne Robinson's powerful novel *Home* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008) might think of this parable with Jack and Glory Boughton in mind, two characters who want to find themselves at home but seem unable to recover from the wounds that home and family inflict. Where can people like this experience grace and inclusion?

*Likewise, people see themselves and their relatives in the passage. This begs us to consider how we relate to the parable's characters in light of our family systems and all their rifts and resentments. If we are going to persist in referring to congregations and the church with familial language (which is problematic in several ways), then we need to be honest and careful about what we promise and how people will hear such imagery.

*Preachers might devote three Sundays to this parable, using each to examine a different character in detail.

1To be fair, a handful of scholars insist that law or custom allowed the son's request.

2Mikeal C. Parsons, "The Prodigal's Elder Brother: The History and Ethics of Reading Luke 15:25-32," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 23 (1996): 171.

Gospel ESV COMMENTARY

Luke 15:12 give me ... property ... coming to me. The younger son does not want to wait for his father's death to receive his inheritance. He was probably a teenager, since he was unmarried. His share would have been half of what the older brother would receive, or one-third of the estate (cf. [Deut. 21:17](#)). **He divided** indicates that the father responded to his younger son's request and allowed him to make his own choice to go his own way.

Luke 15:13 Gathered all indicates that the son converted into cash all of his inheritance, which may have included land or cattle, which he then foolishly **squandered ... in reckless living.**

Luke 15:15 In desperation the son **hired himself out** to a Gentile **to feed pigs** (unclean animals; [Lev. 11:7](#); [Deut. 14:8](#)) that would have been repugnant to him.

Luke 15:16 **no one gave him anything**. His worldly friends all deserted him.

Luke 15:17–18 When the son **came to himself** he realized that his sin was not only against his earthly father but in the deepest sense **against heaven**, that is, against God himself.

Luke 15:20 **A long way off** emphasizes the father's great love; he must have been watching for the son. **ran**. The father cast aside all behavioral conventions of the time, as running was considered to be undignified for an older person, especially a wealthy landowner such as this man. **embraced him**. Literally "fell on his neck"; cf. [Gen. 33:4](#); [45:14](#); [46:29](#).

Luke 15:21 The prodigal repeats his prepared speech (cf. [vv. 18–19](#)), but the father cuts him short before he finishes, showing that he has forgiven him.

Luke 15:22 The **best robe** and **ring** and **shoes** give a picture of the finest clothing, so that the son is ornately dressed. The ring may have contained a seal, indicating that he has been reconciled and welcomed back as a full member of the family.

Luke 15:23 **fattened calf**. Kept for special occasions ([Gen. 18:7](#); [Amos 6:4](#)). They will **eat and celebrate** in thanksgiving to God and not godless self-indulgence (contrast [Luke 12:19](#)).

Luke 15:24 The **son was**(assumed to be) **dead**, but is now **alive** (united with the family) **again**: a picture of membership in God's kingdom.

Luke 15:25 While the younger son represents tax collectors and sinners, the **older son** represents the Pharisees. Both groups were listening to the parables of this chapter (see [vv. 1–3](#)), but the Pharisees were probably the primary intended audience of this parable (see note on v. 3).

Luke 15:27 **Safe** in the protection of the father's household and **sound** in terms of both spiritual and physical health.

Luke 15:28 **He was angry** mirrors the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes ([v. 2](#)).

Luke 15:29 **but he answered his father**. The older brother protests that the welcome extended to the returning younger son is not fair, likening life with his father to years of servitude without celebration. The picture offers a sharp contrast between, on one hand, the mercy and grace extended by the father (representing God the Father) and, on the other hand, the self-righteous resentment (**never disobeyed ... yet you never gave me**) of the older brother (exemplified by the Pharisees).

Luke 15:30 this son of yours. The older brother refuses to acknowledge the prodigal as his brother.

Luke 15:31 Son. An affectionate appeal by the father, showing that he still loved the older son and wanted him to join in the celebration. By implication, Jesus is still inviting the Pharisees to repent and accept the good news.