

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**‘Too Much Mercy?’**

**Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them.”**

The King James Version says that the second son “took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with **riotous** living.” It’s the lifestyle of the youngest, loose-living, rebel son that gives the familiar title, prodigal, to our parable. Prodigal means off-the-hook, careless, extravagant. Youngest sons can be like that – just ask their older brother or sister.

We are not told what “riotous living” means, that is left up to our imaginations – late night parties, gambling, carousing, heavy drinking, sleeping in late. Maybe running with scissors.

The boy works through the vices in the far country funded by daddy’s fortune. This son is like a first-year university student who has never been away from home and who lacks the intestinal fortitude to say no to any temptation. Like Mae West the youngest son thinks too much of a good thing is terrific. He is wasteful, a wild spender, a hedonist, if you will: think James Dean, Charlie

Sheen, and Fifty-Cent, all wrapped into one. He is ‘rebel without a cause.’ He goes to the far country on a Harley, packing heat.

And yet, if we read closely, this is the story of “**a man** who had two sons.” Not a story about “a young man sowing his wild oats who had a father and a brother.” It is a parable of extravagance and reckless expenditure to be sure, but it is the father’s over the top extravagance that’s the heart of the story. The story is really about a father who loved both his sons with everything he had and was and wanted them to love him and each other.

The most interesting character in the story, the one who drives the plot is not the prodigal son or the older brother. It’s the father. He’s the real spend-thrift. His love is outrageous, more permissive than either the younger brother’s wild spending or the older brother’s stingy entitlement. God is like the Father in the story – God’s love knows no limit.

The story one of three that Jesus tells after the Pharisees have questioned him on the matter of “receiving sinners and eating with them.” Jesus tells stories. There was a shepherd, who left ninety-nine sheep, while he tracked down one lost stray. There was a

woman who turned her house inside out to find one lost coin. There was a relentless and loving father who embraced his two undeserving sons.

All three stories counter the scrupulous worry of the Pharisees, that Jesus condones sin by keeping company with the morally delinquent. All three stories answer that frankly God is too busy celebrating with the angels – rejoicing at found sheep and coins and people – to grouse about what happened while they were lost. This is a story about the reckless forgiveness of God.

But isn't it a story that is too reckless? The extravagance of God is without conditions in our story. The young rebel is welcomed home without a lecture. No sermon is given, no shape-up and fly right discourse unfolds, no shaming talk about how your behavior looks on us.

What we want is, “yes, son, we are glad your back.” Now let's see if that tattoo will come off, let's have you turn over a new leaf. Why don't you go in the house. I think there's some humble pie in the frig. Let's talk about your filling out the application UBC.”

The New Testament scholar Anders Nygren reworks the story:

. . . a father whose son had wasted his substance with riotous living in a far country returned to his father destitute but with good intentions; but the father, who knew from experience what such good intentions are usually worth, met the son's entreaties with the stern reply, "My house is closed to you until by your honest work you have earned a place for yourself and so made amends for the wrong you have done," and the son went out into the world and turned over a new leaf and when he afterwards returned he thanked his father for the unyielding severity that had led to his recovery unlike the foolish softness and weak indulgence of some fathers, which would have made him continue in his prodigal ways." Amen and Amen. (Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 83-84).

Ah, but this is not the father of our story. The father in Luke's version is more prodigal than the wayward son. Jesus talks more about the reception party – the menu, the clothes, the jewelry, the over the top reception - than anything else.

The father waits, and while the wayward son is still at a distance, he kicks up the gravel in the driveway to welcome him home, kiss him, forgive him - before the rascal can even croak out his speech. He never gets to say to his father, "take me back as a servant."

The love of the Father preempts the practiced speech of the wayward rascal.

The Father's party seems more careless than the son's riotous living. All the servants, the father and the youngest son get in on an impromptu feast. "This son of mine who was lost is found . . ." "There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." The Father has his son back. God welcomes home the wastrel with open arms. Imagine that.

This son, of course, doesn't deserve any of it. Luke pictures him coming home practicing his speech on the way. We are led to believe that his penitence is practiced; this is calculated stuff, designed to get him three square meals and a roof over his head, even if he has to live as a servant and not a son. We can just picture him as he rounds the road toward home - taking out the stud in his nose, pulling up his low-riding pants.

Jesus' critics cry, "this man receives sinners and eats with them." You expect Jesus to say, but I'm going to make them all good like you, make them shape up, and fly right We thought that Jesus came to teach kids moral standards, to get us all on spiritual steroids so we can up our game.

But no! Here is the homecoming of a young man who treated his father as though he were dead – give me my inheritance now (“drop dead old man”) – and it takes the form of a party. Jesus tells the upstanding citizens of his day, the religious elite, that God just loves to throw a bash, tells them about a series of parties, when a woman finds a coin, a bash after finding a lost sheep, followed by the biggest most questionable end of semester rave, a party for a prodigal son.

The extravagant love of God both fulfills and violates our sense of what is right. Jesus came to keep company with those who need to be saved from the mess that have made of their lives. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost.

No one has gone so far that God has given up on him or her. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, goes into the far country of this world to track down and redeem those whose lives are in disarray. He keeps company with sinners, eats with them. The good news is that God’s standards are lower than ours! **End of scene one.**

The older, dutiful, overachieving, always-picks-up-all-the-awards-at-graduation, progressive, woke son comes home from the fields –

and what does he hear? The outside speakers poolside are turned on and they are blasting out the tunes. The bbq is sparked up. “What’s with the music,” he asks a hired hand.

“The little rebel came home. And your father gives a party, not a lecture. Go figure! Red or white for you?”

“He was angry and refused to go in,” writes Luke.

Older siblings frequently get the raw end of the deal, as the elder brother apparently does in our parable. But, I don’t think his outrage is at sonny boy come home, or even at forgiveness of a certain kind. Let the penitent come home, ok; but let him come home to grovel, and to shame and to sweat it out. What about reaping what you sow? People should get what they deserve. Why should good things happen to bad people? What kind of world would it be if we reward rascals and overlook upstanding citizens who do their duty?

It may be that church life is reflected in this story. The church seems to thrive on our work with the needy, the unemployed, the broken and sick and outcast but what about those of us who are

dutiful, thoughtful, caring and concerned, alert to the right and worthy causes? What about those of us who are burning the candle at both ends trying to maintain our work, serve God, and finish our things to do list?

What about we good citizens, holding down jobs, taking care of our health and relationships, paying our dues, washing our hands, and keeping two meters apart, but who don't even get a gift-card for the Keg. What do you have to do to get a little acknowledgement here? Do we have to go out and act out, sow some wild oats so that someone can kick up a little fuss about us? Why do we bank all our attention to spend on the undeserving?

“Listen,” says the older brother. “For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, (notice not a son) and not once did you order in St Hubert’s for me and my friends. What good is it being good?” Here the hard working one, the always up early, the always caring, always concerned one, spills out his resentment. Nostrils flared, seething with anger. “You have never given me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends . . .” “I have always . . . You have never . . .”

I'm no psychologist, but I think he's hurt. The rage is not altogether hard to grasp. He doesn't use the words, but he is telling his father that he deserves to be noticed. He followed duty and observed obligation, and what did it get him? I'll tell you what it got him – resentment, anger, sleepless nights, stomach trouble.

Standing at the end of the driveway, the older son vents and refuses to come home. He cuts himself off from the very people whose love and acceptance he needs. “This son of yours,” he says, backing away seething self-righteousness.” He's a good person in the worst sense of the term. (Oscar Wilde). **End of scene two.**

For the second time in the same day, the prodigal Father hikes it out to the driveway. He doesn't give a lecture to son number two either. He doesn't cite the command, “honour your father and mother.” He knows there's more than one way to lose a son: it could be to reckless living or to a more serious estrangement, a life of angry self-righteousness. That will put you out of the family even if you stay at home.

He wants what he deserves, and he resents that his brother gets what he doesn't deserve. Older brother wants the place in the

family he earned. He wants a gold medal for services rendered, proper acknowledgement, the family member of the year award. He wants his father's love as a commodity – bought and paid for by dutiful behaviour. He wants his father's favour given as a just desert; and he does have his Father's favour, but not because of anything he has done, any more than the Father loves his younger brother for what he has done. The Father does not love either son according to what they deserve.

**The Father loves because of who he is more than who we are, and the older brother cannot take love as a gift of grace.**

Grace is always a jolt to the older, high-achieving active-at-church brother or sister. He or she can't make it out of the world of work and reward into a world where grace is given freely, where parties get thrown for new people.

The extravagance of the Father once again comes to the fore. Out he goes to give this son what he needs. The older son is reassured that he is family – the grace and love of the Father have seen to that. This father never seems to tire of giving his love away. “Son you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” He lets the younger son back into the family - more than he asked for. He also gives the older brother more than a party – he gets everything,

he gets reassurance ‘you are loved;’ and he gets his younger brother back.

They are a family. They belong to one another, and a party for one is a party for everyone. And sometimes you just have to relax your grip on an actuarial understand of life. “We had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours” – not my son, but your brother – “was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” Sometimes you have just got to shake free of the whole duty scenario and celebrate grace. Why? Because that’s what it is like in heaven. Angels just love this stuff. And don’t we all pray: “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

If only it turned out that well. The parable ends unresolved. There is no end to scene three. A party is underway, and everyone is invited. The story ends with older brother in the yard sulking at his offended sense of fairness. In the background sounds of music and merriment, younger brother dancing with the help.

We don’t know if the younger brother ever grew up and held down regular work. We don’t know if the older brother ever managed to get over his resentment and join the party. What we do know is that God sent Jesus Christ, his only Son, into the far country to

retrieve them both. Jesus came on a mission. He gave his life for us and for our salvation. And for everyone who will receive the grace of our extravagant God, there is a place in the father's house.

Friends, here's the truth about all of us – older and younger brothers or sisters.

None of us gets what we deserve, we get mercy.

All of us get what we don't deserve, we get grace.

And mercy and grace have a name: Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

**And now to God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit  
be glory and praise, now and forever. Amen.**

