

Sermon – Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
4 Lent – Year C  
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“Who’s the Prodigal Now?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. One of my favorite days of the year came and went this past week. No, not the Annunciation of Our Lord, although it is nice to know that there are only nine more shopping months until Christmas. The day to which I’m referring is New Running Shoes Day; it actually happens twice each year. If I weren’t so frugal, it would happen three times every year, but so it goes. New Running Shoes Day is exactly that; it’s the day I get new running shoes. Almost imperceptibly, the shoes in which I’ve been running for the past six or eight months have worn down. Every step is hard now, every footfall a crisis. Finally, my desire for pain-free running outweighs my desire to not spend money and I order a new pair of shoes. And oh, the joy! When I put them on, I realize that I didn’t realize just how far gone my last pair had become. The sudden joy of running cancels out the pain that had been. I lace them up with excitement, eager to run. The funny thing is, I’m only running to stay in shape, driven by a stubborn sense of duty. Imagine the joy I would experience if I were not simply running, but running toward something?
2. Today’s parable is probably familiar to you; it is Jesus’ great parable of grace. The story is simple enough, if surprising. A man had two sons. One was pretty good; the other, not so much. The younger son came to his father and, to put it plainly, told his dad to drop dead. Or, at least, to give the son the inheritance he’d have coming when his father did get around to dying. This younger son – this prodigal – goes off to Vegas or wherever and blows the

whole thing on wanton living. Broke and hungry, he began to reason with himself, to imagine bargains he might strike. "I bet my father would take me in as a hired hand," he thinks; that seems to be the best the son can hope for, and who can blame him? He'd be lucky to not get thrown in jail or simply turned away. And meanwhile, the younger son's older brother has been punching in every morning to do his work as a dutiful son. Day in and day out. While the word "prodigal" does not appear in the parable, we have long applied it to the younger son, for he wastes, squanders, so much. We could apply it to the elder son, too, as he stands prodigal outside the party, wasting his chance to celebrate.

3. The parable isn't really about either son, however. At the center of this parable stands the father. Actually, at the center of this parable *runs* the father. For what has the father been doing throughout the long absence of his younger son? He has been keeping watch, scanning the horizon, hoping against hope that this son who is as good as dead can come back to life. And when his father sees him, he runs. He runs with joyful abandon, confronting the boy's sin not with a stern lecture but with wild delight, with hugs and kisses. He runs, and greets the boy's contrived, repentant, prepared remarks not with judgment but by ignoring what he says altogether, being too busy issuing orders for a party, fatted calf and all. The father, it turns out, is the most prodigal of them all. To be prodigal is to be wasteful and extravagant, and that is what the father is. He tosses aside half his wealth at the selfish request of his child, and when that same child comes crawling back home, he wastes even more on an extravagant party. But it's only a waste if what you're looking for is fairness and judgment, and that's not what you'll get from this father. And it is not, finally, what you'll get from our prodigal God.
4. In a recent interview with *The Christian Century*, Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine notes that it's wrong to be surprised by the father's response; we often think that what the father should really do is judge the

boy harshly. But as Levine points out, “We know from other sources of this period that if the younger son comes back home, of course the father is delighted.” *Of course the father is delighted.* The surprise is not that the father in the story responds as he does; the surprise is that in his great parable of grace, Jesus uses a parent to describe God instead of a judge, king, or landowner. Such people are used by Jesus in other parables for other reasons, but here, for this son – and for his brother, too – Jesus wants us to see God as a parent. Not as one for whom love and mercy are secondary characteristics; no, for this father they are defining markers of identity. Of course the father welcomes home the son. As a parent, I can tell you that there are any number of ways that my children can and do disappoint me, and frankly, I’m sure the feeling is mutual. Letting my mind wander in the dark watches of the night, there are lots of things that a child of mine could do in the future that would break my heart and crush my spirit. But there is nothing, *nothing*, that Greta, Anders, or Torsten could ever do that would keep me from scanning the horizon. Nothing. Nothing they could do that would keep me from lacing up my sneakers and running to them as fast as I could. Nothing. I’d become prodigal for such a chance, willing to waste anything to welcome one home. This is the way Jesus is inviting us to see God today, as a parent, a father, who loves with a perfect, and perfectly extravagant, love. And for any among us who have a more fraught or painful relationship with a parent, because of abuse or neglect, disappointment or absence; for any among us who yearn for a father or a mother who is no longer living? Well, God’s parental embrace holds all of that, too, and the party that’s beginning promises reconciliation and reunion for all those who need it.

5. So now, rather than tell you a story to drive home the point, I want you to sit with your own story for a moment. To honestly consider yourself at your worst, lowest, most broken. Perhaps you squandered and wasted much, in opportunities or relationships. Perhaps you’ve stood by like the elder son in

the parable, grumbling about how unfair life can be instead of enjoying it. Perhaps you've run off, away from God and goodness. Perhaps you've just slowly, almost imperceptibly, gotten yourself good and lost. And I want you to hold this image now. Not to wallow or beat yourself up. No. Instead, to hear and remember this promise, that *this* worst, lowest, most broken version of yourself is the very one for whom our heavenly Father is scanning the horizon. *This* you is the beloved child for whom God was willing to extravagantly waste everything, even the very Son of God. *This* you is held in God's embrace. *This* you was dead, but in Christ is found and alive again.

6. Jesus knows that the only thing to do in such a circumstance, never mind the older brother's opinion, is to throw a party. And so the fatted calf is killed. A good rule of thumb for beginning to understand what Jesus is saying in a parable is to see if Jesus can be found within the parable. Here he is none other than the fatted calf, the one who gives his life to create the resurrection feast. I know that I quoted Robert Farrar Capon last week, but I'll do so again today: "The fatted calf proclaims that the party is what the father's house is all about, just as Jesus the dead and risen Bridegroom proclaims that an eternal bash is what the universe is all about. Creation is not ultimately about religion . . . it's about God having a good time and itching to share it." Now, this is not in any way to minimize the pain and suffering we endure, or to gloss over the fact that we as God's people are called to do serious work in this broken world. It is, however, a joyous reminder that we do so in anticipation of the end of all such things, of sin, and suffering, and death, and the beginning of the celebration feast that centers on the Lamb of God and stretches into eternity.
7. For now, for today, wherever and whoever you are, know that God is running toward you. Hear again that Jesus was willing let his life be wasted so that we who don't deserve it could live. Alive again, come home. Home to the God who simply wants you back, and will do anything to get you back into the

party. And for goodness' sake, don't stand around moping like the older brother. The party is for you, too. So come, eat of the fragments that fall from the fatted calf, the body and blood of the Lamb of God, broken and shed for you. For you were dead, but the prodigal God has run to you in joy to bring you home again. You're alive. Join the party. Come on in. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.