

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector  
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C  
March 6, 2016**

*Luke 15:11-32*

Back in high school, I was good friends with a guy named John. We ran track and ran after girls together. He had the look that every advertiser dreams of – tall, thin, and good looking. He was part-Caucasian, part-Latino, and part-Native American with blue eyes. He had a loving family. His dad was a doctor and his mother a nurse. In high school, he was voted the best dressed and tied for the biggest flirt. Everyone liked him.

After high school, he decided that he was ready to strike out on his own. He got a menial job in a city close by and secured his first apartment. He asked for his inheritance early and received some money and a little BMW coupe from his parents. They were trying to be supportive. They brought him up as best as they knew how.

John quickly fell in with the wrong crowd. He got into drugs and some other things. Not long after he smashed the little BMW and walked away. He just left it sitting there by the side of the road. Though shy around women, they flocked to him. They liked the bad boy image with tattoos and old motorcycle. He wrecked that too. He tried a little college but that didn't work out either. Not long after that... the money started to run out – and so did most of the new friends. He went from job to dead-end job. Eventually, he began working in the incinerator at the hospital. I visited him there. That was a hard thing to see at 19 years old. He worked covered head to toe in protective gear. When it got too hot standing in front of the roaring, open flame, he would take off the gear. He stood shirtless, in hazardous waste shoveling other people's garbage.

After a time, it began to dawn on him that he did not have to live like this. His parents had said he could always go home but that seemed like a long time ago. It was only a couple years, in fact. Would his parents still recognize him, let alone receive him with his tattoos and scars? He did go home, eventually, when he was ready. A true story. He now works as a shift manager at a plant, fixes motorcycles, and became a father himself. He was at the bedside when his father died of cancer. Not a Hollywood ending, but some grace and redemption nonetheless.

The Gospel for today is often called the “Story of the Prodigal Son.” Usually we hear this as a tale of repentance and forgiveness. Of one who was lost and found. The focus is on the son who left home, “The Prodigal Son.” Prodigal means extravagantly wasteful. Some call this the “Story of the Two Sons.” It is about the son who repents and is forgiven *and* about the faithful one who remained home. I suspect that each of us has felt like one or both at various times. You might even call it the “Story of the Forgiving Father.” It tells us as much about God, represented by the Father, as it does about us, represented by the sons.

It has been said that the Church is not a country club to make good people better but a hospital for sinners – a community of hope. There are many people who may feel like the Prodigal Son. They may not be feeding pigs or shoveling garbage into an incinerator... but they have hit rock bottom. One can be broke, or broken, in many ways. You may know someone like this. You may *be* someone like this – shoveling someone else's... stuff – wondering if you can go home again – or find someplace *better* than home.

It is the way of the world to leave home and go one's own way. The Prodigal Son takes this approach beyond the limit. By asking for his inheritance early, he was asserting that he didn't care if his parents were alive or dead. One rarely receives an inheritance from a *living* relative.

The son in the bible realized what he had done when working with the pigs, a horrible thing for a Jew. My friend realized it working at the incinerator, a horrible thing for anyone. He had wasted his gifts. At least if he went home... he would have a place to sleep and enough food – Hope. What each of these characters failed to realize... is how much their parents loved them. They were repentant... that is, they were sorry for what they had done. They did not understand the parent's love was *not* based on their actions but was unconditional, without requirements. Nor is God's love dependent on our actions. When one seeks God, the Lord is always there to welcome them with open arms.

That is all well and good for those of us who have erred and strayed from God's ways like lost sheep. But many of us have probably not squandered our spiritual or physical inheritance. Put simply, many of us have probably been pretty good. Certainly, we could do better. There have been lapses and faults now and then. But we haven't killed anyone. We work hard, pay our bills, try to do the right thing, make good grades, try to be faithful and honest, and to help other people. We can feel much like the good son.

What did the good son, in the biblical story, feel when the scoundrel came home? Love or thankfulness? No. It was more akin to jealousy or resentment. He acted like a child when a parent pays more attention to another child for whatever reason. "I have always been good but you never gave *me* a party." "Pay attention to me!" You don't love me! Me! Mark Twain described the second son as "... a *good* man in the *worst* sense of the word."

I have heard this story countless times. Often a family focuses on the child who most needs their help. This has biblical precedent. It is the lost sheep of Israel that Jesus went after – not the ones safe inside. Who needs a doctor, he said, the sick or those who are well? This story is not about partiality of loving one child more than the other. The scripture says that God shows no partiality. The father, knowing how the good son felt, took him aside. *I know* you were always faithful. You are always with me and *all* that I have is yours. This is a time to rejoice for the one who was lost and is found... there is hope again. That is good news for all of us.

We can learn from the good and faithful child. He could have organized a search party. He could have *at least* gone out and met his brother at the door when he got home. He could have supported his father and helped him. We, in the church, are called to go out and bring in the lost – to welcome those seeking hope. At the very least, we can welcome those who make it through the doors of the church by themselves. No one comes here by accident. Each person here comes looking for God or a community of hope whether they can articulate it or not. They might be tired of shoveling and wondering if they are welcome to come home and find God here at Calvary. The inheritance is *already* ours with *more than* enough to share.

As much as this story tells us about ourselves in the image of the two sons... it reveals just as much to us about what God is like as the forgiving Father. The great surprise of this story – is that it is *God* who is the *real* prodigal. So extravagantly, lavishly, freely, generously giving in love it is *almost* wasteful. That's what you do for someone you love more than life itself. That's what God is like – extravagantly, lavishly, freely, generously giving in love it is *almost* wasteful. There is more than enough hope for *all of us*.