Lent 4C / 3.10.2013 / Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Jesus likes to tell stories. And the story he tells today, some have titled “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” Parable meaning story, prodigal meaning extravagant. The story of the extravagant son. I would suspect that almost everyone knows this story, in and outside the church.

Growing up I heard it often. My childhood congregation did not use a lectionary, which means it did not have appointed biblical passages for each Sunday. Preachers would choose any text they wanted. The one they chose most often was this parable.

It’s easy to see why, because the story appears to have all the elements of a blockbuster: Sex, and drugs, and rock and roll—are at least the first century equivalent.

It begins with the younger son asking for his inheritance before his father is even dead—which is at least bad form, if not outright insulting. Then the boy takes the money and runs—runs far, far away. And apparently, when he gets to where he is going, he never even thinks of opening a savings account or setting up an IRA. He just spends cash like there’s no tomorrow. But as is so often the case, tomorrow comes—and the boy discovers he is desperately broke. The only job he can find is working with pigs. According to the religious law, a Jewish boy must have nothing to do with swine. So it seems it can’t get much worse for this boy, but it does. A famine falls upon the land. And the boy begins to think that the food the pigs are munching on looks like pretty good eating.

This is no way to live. So he decides he’ll go back to his home and beg his father to let him work as a hired hand. It’s a calculated move, I think. More manipulative than heartfelt. He even practices his groveling speech that he’ll deliver to his father. “Please take me in as a hired hand,” he recites.

Well, it’s easy to see why preachers like to focus on the younger son, because the preacher can say, “All you out there who live a wild life, wallowing in filth, you need to come to your senses before it’s too late.”

As a boy, that’s how I heard it preached time after time. And sermons would end with these words: “With every head bowed and every eye closed, and as our choir sings another stanza of “Just As I Am,” make your decision for Christ now. Tomorrow may be too late. Accept him as your personal Savior. I’ll be here at the front, waiting to receive you. If you’ve fallen away, come, rededicate yourself to the Lord. Come, and be born again.”

If the story is indeed about the younger son, then that’s the kind of sermon you will hear. And, goodness knows, there’s nothing wrong with calling people to repentance and conversion. If a person is living a dissolute life, then by all means she or he should repent. But I don’t think this parable is about the younger son and some kind of conversion experience.

Neither is it about the older son. Although I would suspect that you and I have more in common with the older son than the younger. Have you had the experience of stealing a lot of money from your parents, flying off to Las Vegas, and blowing it all on slot machines, mixed drinks, and neon-lit night clubs? Now, I won’t ask for a show of hands, but I’d bet most of you have never done anything like that.

No, I would think we’d be more like the elder son. I mean, who among us hasn’t been at least a little envious of someone else’s good fortune? Who hasn’t been at least a tiny bit angry when someone else gets praised and the hard work you did was overlooked? Who doesn’t get frustrated when loyalty is ignored and immaturity rewarded? I think we understand why the older son is angry—and may even sympathize with him. But the parable is not about the older son.

So if it’s not about either son, then who is this parable about? Yep, you guessed it: The father. The prodigal father—the father who is extravagant with his love and his mercy.

He dearly loves his sons—both the wild-living younger one and the resentful older one. When the younger son disappears in the distance, I suspect that every night at the dinner table the father says a prayer for his boy, a prayer for both of his sons, in fact. And I would bet that every morning the father scans the horizon, hoping to see that younger son walking down the road toward home.

To have loving parents is a wonderful gift. I’ve been blessed with such. I hope you have too.

I could tell you about my mother who on cold winter mornings in Texas, when the temperature almost got down to freezing, would heat up our blue jeans in the dryer before we put them on to walk to our elementary school. Of course, the warmth only lasted a few steps down the driveway, but the loving thought has lasted at least fifty years now.

Or I could tell you about the time my father helped me with a science project. It was due Monday morning, and I first mentioned it to him on Sunday night. He could have chewed me out, but he didn’t. Instead, he calmly drove me up to the lumberyard where he worked, opened up the locked and darkened building, and gathered the materials we would need.

Or I could tell you of the many times my dad would carry in his little boys who had fallen asleep in the backseat of the car. One by one, he’d lift us in his arms, take us into the house, and lay us gently in our beds. He held us close, and we could breathe in his love.

Loving parents do such things, don’t they? They never stop loving their children.

So just look at this father in the parable—this prodigal father, so extravagant in his love. When he spots his younger son coming down the road, he takes off running to greet him. In biblical times, a dignified man did not run. But this father can’t help himself. And before the younger son can recite his pitiful speech, the father sweeps him up in his arms, and kisses him. And then quickly yells to his servants to get ready for a feast. “Bring a robe,” he shouts, “the very best. Get a ring too. And bring along his sandals!” Soon the party is on. Rich food, and music and dancing abound.

When the older son gripes about this, the father assures him that he loves him dearly, too. “Everything I have is yours,” he says. But then he explains: “We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life. He was lost and has been found.”

Love gathers you and me in its arms and welcomes us home. This parable is about God’s great love. The apostle Paul summarizes this parable nicely when he writes: “Nothing can separate us from the love of God.”

Wrong turns, outrageous living, bitter hearts, crazy acts, insidious arguments, or death itself—nothing can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ. Love comes running.

This season of Lent will take us to the Cross of Good Friday, where the beloved son of God will die. But God’s love is not defeated. Love opens a tomb on that first Easter morning and it will do so again. “This child of mine was dead,” God proclaims, “and is alive again!” When you and I hear that loving word spoken to us, we will have nothing left to do but celebrate.

Amen.