

## **Parents & Prodigal Youth ~ Forgiving Each Other**

Sermon on Luke 15:11-32 The Prodigal Son

Sunday March 18, 2007

Trinity United, Ottawa

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The younger son took half of everything his father had, and he took off. The youth disappeared into a distant world of dissolute living. But when he finally hit bottom, he looked back and remembered his family. Trusting in his lifelong experience of his parent's love, he dared to go back. The prodigal son returned home apologizing, taking responsibility for his actions. When he came back to where he belonged, he was extravagantly forgiven and celebrated.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is of course an allegory about God's love for us all. It's one of Jesus' three 'lost and found' stories in Luke, illustrating the prodigious, overflowing forgiveness awaiting all God's returning children. It is a memorable tale that helps us to feel a font of forgiveness - God's unconditional love - washing over us continuously and washing away all that we may regret - no matter how long or stormy our separation.

But the story of the prodigal son is also a story about parents and troubled youth - about families and forgiveness. Here is ancient wisdom that applies to today's family systems - a narrative of hope for each person touched and torn by a prodigal's disappearance. Whether the beloved child we once knew has disappeared into drugs or alcohol, into depths of depression or into rebellious dissolution on the streets, this story urges us all on toward a happier ending.

We hold our Bible stories personally sacred when we are able to use them in our own lives, for guidance and reassurance, as narrative maps that lead us toward hope. This story reminds us that when we feel utterly lost, we will be found again. That when our child seems utterly lost to us, she will find herself again. This story is personally sacred to me, so when it came up in our Lenten Lectionary, I had to

humbly share it as reassurance for our current prodigals and those who love them.

*“This daughter of mine was dead and is alive again, she was lost and now is found!”*

As most of you know, the prodigal story in my family is my daughter. (And I hope you also know that chapter had a very happy ending, still brimming with new beginnings.) The prodigal dramas currently playing out in our church community are equally about boys and girls, young men and women from tweens to twenties. A study released last week by the Vanier Institute of the Family confirms that since the 1950's the number of ‘antisocial’ youths has quadrupled. Dramas about addicted, deeply depressed and out-of-control teens - kids whom we used to assume hailed from poorer quarters - now play out on any suburban block. Parental horror stories that involve police and pimps and suicide attempts happen among nice families like ours too. So we need to be able to talk about the prodigals and support them and each other, till this time of trial too shall pass! And we need to prevent more prodigal stories!

Since my bright, creative girl descended into Rideau Street at the tender age of 13, I have learned more about today’s troubled youth and our *criminal* culture than I could bare to tell, or you need to hear. I’ve been serving as a community rep on the Ottawa Integrated Drug & Addiction Strategy. We are advocating for a Youth Addictions Treatment Centre in this region - because there really is nowhere for desperate families to turn, particularly those with self-destructive teens under 16. In the months ahead, I’ll be coming to you to ask for support in lobbying governments to fund this life-saving project.

Because we have shared our family story publicly, in the hope of getting help for others, I regularly get calls from frantic parents of desperately depressed or aggressively angry young people. I learned - the hard way! - not to judge parents for their kids’ behaviours. Poor parenting is often not the problem. What is

happening to our youth today is way bigger than family. Youth are often victims of what I call 'culture crime', that parents just can't combat alone.

When really bad things happen to good kids - surprise, surprise! - they express their pain to the parents who love them. I understand now that young people's hateful words and actions towards their loving parents are usually the echo of an adolescent's self-hate and shame. This is the drama they create, to externalize the traumas their young psyches just can't carry. And I've learned that leaving home like a prodigal is often the unspoken parting cry of a wounded child: "You didn't protect me!" - with his parents left wondering, "...from *what*?!"

Well...depression is rampant today, but with hormone-ridden teens it is very difficult to recognize and diagnose. 'Depressive' often plays out as 'aggressive' in early adolescents. Depressed kids discover that they can 'self medicate' with dope and booze. Depression and drugs are often linked back to a sexual boundary violation. Such incidents are shockingly common even within school hours, and they can capsize a young teen's self esteem in the space of five minutes. And the drug dealers are in the schoolyards from grade six, seeking out kids with a crack in their self esteem. Maybe it's a learning disability or bullying, an old divorce sadness or adoption abandonment feelings, a poor body image or just being too different to belong in the middle school cliques. Sometimes, what fills the crack in a kid's self esteem is dope and booze - then crack.

Knowing this makes me wonder what had happened in the Prodigal Son's life story before he left home. Did you ever wonder about that? Maybe that older brother was a bully? Or a favoured 'good son' whom little brother could never live up to? Maybe his mother died when he was born - a common occurrence in that time - and he felt he was responsible. (Today it would be divorce that a child felt he was responsible for.) Or maybe the prodigal son was just a second child - number twos are prone to risk-taking, just as number ones are typically protective and responsible. 'Normal adolescent risk-taking' easily lands kids in deep trouble today,

because the risks with street drugs and sex rapidly escalate to life threatening.

And what was the Prodigal's older brother's story? Do you identify with him perhaps? Was he understandably angry about being 'collateral damage' to his brother's delinquency? When there is a 'lost one' in the family, whether it is to drugs or serious depression, siblings inevitably suffer. They have their own slice of the family's guilt pie, and they too deal with the shame and blame we feel in the community, when a child has gone astray. The siblings in any prodigal story deserve a lot of community support, because their parents are often too anxious and distracted to listen attentively.

Usually, everyone is trying their very best in a loving family, but there is always something hurtful for everyone to forgive and to be forgiven. I expect even the Prodigal Father had things he really was really anxious to explain to his returning son, hoping for forgiveness. And if indeed there was a mom in that family, you can sure bet she felt guilty!

Henri Nouwen, in his book "The Return of the Prodigal Son" suggests that we need to find our own way into the experiences of both of the brothers in the story, and the Father too. We naturally resist identifying with the Father who is a God figure, because who thinks they have the strength and wisdom to be an all-forgiving parent? But that is the kind of spiritual stretch that some of our prodigal kids often call us to! To stretch our compassion into forgiving even what feels at first to be unforgivable and incomprehensible behaviour.

If we do persist in walking with our prodigal youth, gradually, we parents learn to live out some messages that are helpful in healing, like: That behaviour is unacceptable. The consequences are going to be unavoidable. But our love for you is unconditional!

When I get a call from a desperate parent, I pass along some of the practical and

tactical advice that other parents and professionals offered me, but what those moms and dads seem to need as well is a sympathetic listener and a glimmer of hope. They need to hear that it isn't their fault. That they are not failures as parents or a bad family. When kids have gone astray, parents need so much encouragement and support, because they usually can't forgive themselves.

I always try to pass along the blessings that a wonderful police street nurse named Louise Logue gave to me at crucial moments. She'd say: "Your daughter is lucky to have a mom who'll fight for her like you do," or "You guys are doing a great job." Those words were such a drink of water in my desert of maternal despair.

I don't hesitate any more to offer prayers, even to 'not religious' people and tough teens. They are surprisingly grateful. And a reference to the prodigal story can help too: "The beautiful child you have always loved *is* still in there. He may immobilized under an avalanche of depression or hidden behind a smoke screen of dope, but with your love he'll make it back." or "Your wonderful young woman is lost right now, but she isn't gone. It'll take time and the right interventions, but let's pray that she will find herself and shine again." My prodigal daughter did - so I know it is possible!

For any prodigal's 'operation go home' to have a happy ending, we usually need good professional intervention, family therapy and the ultimate stretching of our parental patience. Everyone in the prodigal's family has to learn how to listen a whole lot better and support each other, as well as to confess and commit to change. As Henri Nouwen suggested, the whole family has to learn to walk in each other's shoes.

But that is how tragedies turn into homecoming celebrations. Along the prodigal journey, a troubled teen often becomes the catalytic healer for the whole family system. It was like that for us. Although she led our lives astray, our prodigal eventually taught us all so much about healing ourselves and helping each other

heal, about family forgiveness, about how a community at prayer like ours can provide real support for all generations...and about how angels and grace abound!

That's the spiritual part of dealing with youth depression and addiction - discovering the healing power of unconditional love. And next to God, parents seem to be best equipped to give it!

When we open up in our helplessness and let God's love flow through us, healing and forgiveness become possible. For terrifying teens. For imperfect parents. For siblings. For our self. We all get to come home!

Thanks be to the Creator whose love pours endlessly forth, over all of us prodigals.  
Amen.