

March 27, 2022
The Second Sunday in Lent, Year C
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

In the gospels, the Pharisees and scribes serve a literary purpose: they are foils for Jesus. One online resource defines the term *literary foil* this way: "A literary foil is a character whose purpose is to accentuate or draw attention to the qualities of another character, most often the protagonist. This literary term is named after an old jewelry trick of setting a gem on a foil base to enhance its shine."¹

In the portion of Luke from which we heard today, the shiny Jesus responds to some not-so-shiny foils. Let's hear the beginning of that long reading again: "All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"²

Jesus responds to those grumblers with parables, three of them, in fact, of which we heard only the third. Remember, a parable is not an example from real life. A parable is a story used to illustrate a lesson. A parable would be set and set up in a way that was familiar to the original listeners. But it would also have some outrageous exaggeration to drive home the point.

The opening that I just reread is followed by the Parable of the Lost Sheep, then the Parable of the Lost Coin, and *then* the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Though we skipped the first two, it's good to notice that they're there, because they contribute to the overall meaning of this section. With each parable, the proportion gets larger and the stakes get higher: one sheep in ninety-nine, one coin ten, one brother in two. Each individual item is too valuable to give up on. Even if the proportion is small, the return is worthy of celebration. The joy over returned sheep, returned coin, and returned son ... that is nothing compared to the celebration in heaven when there is a returned sinner.

Let's put a pin in the word *sinner* for a few minutes. Instead let's talk more specifically about the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In first-century Palestine, society was organized not in nuclear families like ours but rather in extended households. These households existed in complex hierarchical relationships with one another. It was what scholars call an *honor-shame society*. On one hand, honor enhanced status. On the other hand, shame reduced status. Both honor and shame reflected on the entire household. No one wanted to give up their status.

The original listeners would have heard the Parable of the Prodigal Son as threaded through with the dynamics of shame. The Prodigal Son's request for his inheritance, his "dissolute living," his working with pigs: all shameful. The son's part in the shame dynamic is pretty obvious even to us twenty-first-century listeners. What is perhaps less obvious to use is the *father's* part in the shame dynamic. It's what would *really* have captured the attention of those first-century listeners. We get a glimpse of it when we read that the father "ran" to the son. The patriarch of a household would not be running, not to any place, not at any time. Throwing honor to the wind, the father runs to the son, dresses him, and throws him a party: under the circumstances, everything he did was shameful. Both the son *and* the father have thrown shame upon and compromised the honor of their entire household.

The pouting older brother soon offers his jealous grumblings. His complaints are about the expenditure of things, and about the expenditure of honor. Imagine the jeweler "setting a gem on a foil base to enhance its shine." An incident like this would have reduced the entire household's shine. The father doesn't care about that. By the end of the parable, Jesus has used the Prodigal's brother to turn a mirror back onto his own grumblers. They don't look like gems. Jesus has thrown a party, and they could come, but, like the brother, they've turned their back and walked away. They don't even recognize it as a party. And they're hurting only themselves.

Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber addressed this parable in a sermon a few years ago. I just stumbled across it this week. In it, she pointed out something that she's only recently learned and which I had never caught before I read her sermon. It's the definition of the word *prodigal*. Because I've only ever heard the word in association with this parable, I thought it had to do with *returning*. But that's not what it means. *Prodigal* actually means "spending money or resources freely and recklessly" or being "wastefully extravagant."³ One synonym for *prodigal* is *profligate*. That seems clearer to me. With that definition of *prodigal* in mind, Bolz-Weber writes this: "if the word prodigal means wasteful extravagance, then isn't it really the story of the prodigal father?" She goes on to note that the father is wastefully extravagant to *both* sons: he gives both their freedom, he throws the younger one a party, he reminds the older one that "all that is mine is yours."⁴

Maybe it's just me, but when I hear this parable, the first think I do is start to think about when I have been the returning one, and when I have been the grumbling one. Because I have been plenty of both, in many I have fallen short. One way to get unstuck in thinking about that is to remember that the story is less about the sons and more about the father. It's about the reckless and even wasteful extravagance of the grace of God, as demonstrated in God's love for all that God created, including all of us. It has nothing to do with anything we *did* do or do *not* do. Nothing. God loves us.

Let's to that word *sinner* that we put a pin in. We hear this parable during Lent because of its connection to sin and repentance. I admit that I don't really like talking about sin and repentance. I'm not the only Episcopalian with that problem. I expect that for me it's because so much of what Christianity has called a sin doesn't seem to me to be sinful at all, and it has been used to shame. And so it's helpful to remember here that the father in this parable represents God, not the church. The church has a long history of fixating on select sins while ignoring others. Some of us who wandered did so because of the church. Some of us who returned did so in spite of the church. God's grace found us where we were, and God's grace led us home, where we found our extravagant God, who doesn't care one whit about shame, who tells us we were fine all along, and who reminds us that they were with us all along.

It has been hard to watch the conservative sector of the church pile on to the ridiculous cacophony of noise that's going on in our public discourse right now. This week's most disheartening dollop had to do with the brouhaha about critical race theory and a highly qualified nominee for Supreme Court Justice. I like to think about critical race theory as simply about setting aside the glasses we usually look through and trying out a different pair. In that, it's like feminist theory, and it's like queer theory. When we put on different glasses, we see things we never saw before. We need to see those things. Maybe the best pair of glasses to try on are the glasses that God uses to look at us. God knows when supposed "sinners" and "tax collectors" are being ostracized and marginalized. And in response, God is throwing them a party.

There is a lot of tough news in the news right now, but it's been worse before. While God doesn't need to be set on a foil base for enhanced shine, sometimes we do. We need communities of love and support and remembrance. The Parable of the Prodigal Father—the Parable of the Prodigal *God*—reminds us to not lose heart. For all the wanderers and grumblers, us included, God's grace is showering down, and the party is still in progress.

Notes

¹ "Writing 101: What Is a Foil Character in Literature? Learn About 2 Types of Literary Foils and the Differences Between Foil and Antagonist," an article on the *MasterClass* website, September 9, 2021, available online at <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/writing-101-what-is-a-foil-character-in-literature-learn-about-2-types-of-literary-foils-and-the-differences-between-foil-and-antagonist#what-are-the-key-differences-between-a-foil-and-an-antagonist> (accessed March 27, 2022).

² Luke 15:1-2 NRSV.

³ "prodigal," as displayed on a Google search, available online at <https://www.google.com/search?q=prodigal+definition&oq=prodi&aqs=edge.0.69i5913j0i433i512j69i57j0i6712j0i10i67j0i67i433.3824j0j1&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> (accessed March 27, 2022).

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Sermon: The Parable of the Prodigal Father," posted in her "Sarcastic Lutheran" blog on the *Patheos* website, March 11, 2013, available online at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2013/03/sermon-the-parable-of-the-prodigal-father/> (accessed March 27, 2022).