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“There Was a Man Who Had Two Sons...”

Sermon on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (Lent 4C)

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Way back, centuries ago, Lent was about far more than me giving up my chocolate. Lent was about more than me limiting screen time or my personal cell phone use. Toward its beginning Lent was about *reunion* in the church. It was also a time of difficult reconciliation. Lent in those days was an opportunity for bringing recalcitrant sinners back into the fold of the church. In those days the church had been experiencing persecution from the ruling powers. Not every Christian responded the same way to the stress of persecution: some Christians dug in their heels, other Christians laid low, still others just left. Now imagine how *hard* it was to break bread and drink wine together with other believers who responded differently to persecution: some of whom resisted while others tried to accommodate. So, Lent back then was not just for giving something up personally, it was about dealing with conflict in relationships across the pews. Lent was for reuniting people together. Lent was an intentional, difficult time of reunion.

The problem for us today is the word reunion itself. Reunion has its own baggage for us. We North Americans find it easy to paint reunion in bright, pastel colors. Reunion for us is what people do about every ten years after high school graduation. There is the exchange of yearbook pictures, the catching up on stories of new children or even grandchildren, perhaps there is even the old letter jacket in the back of the closet that you can almost fit into. Reunion for us is a cheerful picture, a time for banners and golden memories between old friends. And yet, truth be told, even for us reunion has a darker side. I am not just talking about worries with wrinkles, weight gain, and hair loss since our yearbook pictures. I suspect not every memory of high school itself is good. Sure, there were pimples and puberty, but there were also slights, unwanted nicknames, catcalls, and even slurs. That is probably why people so often hesitate to go to a reunion, even when they long to. Reunion is more than just a promise for us, it is also a threat. Reunion brings with it a lot of old baggage—and that now is part of *our* view of Lent as reunion.

But why focus on Lenten reunion *this Sunday*? Well, all this talk of reunion just helps set the table for today’s worship. Now I suppose that is true every week at Redeemer.<sup>1</sup> We hear God’s living word of promise in scripture and sermon and then we enact it together around the Lord’s Table. Every Sunday, week after week, sermons help to “set the table.” But this week setting the table has an even more specific meaning. We are setting the table in light of Jesus’ famous parable—the one we call the parable of the prodigal son. Like a lot of Jesus’ parables, the problem is that we know the story too well. This makes the place settings around the table all too *prescribed*: Mom sits here, dad sits here, brother and sister right over here. We do not just know the place settings, we know the roles that the parable prescribes. A Canadian Lutheran pastor in Calgary posted recently that every time he wrote the word “sinner” his phone’s auto-correct changed it to “dinner.” There it is: sinner to dinner. This parable has place settings for redemption—a simple reunion set in a story of redemptive love.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was preached at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Woburn, Massachusetts on Sunday, March 31 2019.

But we should hold on for a second. While the parable of the prodigal son *is* a beautiful story, it is just another churchy redemption story. This parable is not just some allegory where all the roles are so neatly prescribed. It is not just about some soft-hearted father and a loveable rogue son hugging for the cameras. No, Jesus' parable envisions ordinary people in untidy relationships. When you read it closely, it is not really redemptive in the churchy sense at all. The parable begins not with pious tones, but just like so many other common stories that started just like it. "There was a man who had two sons." And with these words, Biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine says, with those ordinary words every difficult relationship with two sons and a parent rushes back to mind: Cain and Able, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau.<sup>2</sup> The parable is anything but churchy sweet. This parable is a story about fraught relationships and a difficult path to returning home for reconciliation. It is not the story about the prodigal son and a happy reunion, but begins with these simple ordinary words: "a man had two sons," TWO SONS.

Now, it may be hard to hear a familiar story like the parable of the prodigal as if for the first time. But we should try, people of God. We can think of the parable as more than a happy allegory of redemption, but an ordinary struggle for three ordinary people and all the gracious messiness that sets around the table we ourselves are sharing this Sunday morning. We just need to keep it ordinary and fraught. There was a man who had two sons.

The parable begins in a blush of promising youth. We know that it starts as the story of the family's younger brother. *He* wants *his part* of the promise now and his father just grants him half the inheritance that day. Now, being landed, the means of this family's lives is tied up in property which in turn generates wealth both now and in the future. Levine notes that the younger son has not sinned by asking for his portion of the inheritance.<sup>3</sup> However, given the father's dependence on income in later years it would mean dad was a bit foolish. Why? The sharing of the inheritance now would have obligated the younger son to take care of his father in his old age.

But foolishness seems to run in this family. The son once he receives his portion of the promise sells it for cash. Younger son "gathers up" half the inheritance, and disperses it just as quickly. In fact, he squanders it all on a raucous life in a far country. Now because we love the story, we sometimes make the prodigal's life away from home even more scandalous than it was. The parable does speak of the young man's dissolute life, but spares us any titillating details. Instead, the parable shows the younger now penniless son's more immediate needs: things like food and work. So, the younger brother, having now spent his promised inheritance, hires himself out, and sends himself out to work with some Gentile's pigs. Again, Levine notes, this younger son is not so much sinful or even impure, as foolish. I suppose in that way, he fits right in!

I say foolish as well, because this father and the younger son actually get back together. We know how the parable goes. The son does not so much repent, as come to his senses. The text says he came to himself while admiring the pig's slop. We do hear the younger son prepare a repentance speech—but the empty words really just show his ability to fake piety above all else.

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<sup>2</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 50.

<sup>3</sup> Levine, *Short Stories*, 51-52.

But here's the truly foolish part. As the younger son approaches his one-time home in the sole hope of getting on the payroll back at the family farm, his father runs up to him and embraces him *before he can give his repentance speech*. His father even puts the best robe on him and gives this destitute, barefoot son shoes. Why? Well, the father says it clearly. He rejoices not because his sinful son saw the light, but because the one who was as good as dead is now alive. Now it is time for the party to get going.

And what a party it is! It has everything. Streamers, banners, and fatted calf for the main course. There is clear mention of music and yes, even dancing. The son may be penniless, but he returns to the best party ever with his father giving orders to keep it going. They have it all! Except, something is missing. *Something is missing*. Oh, yeah! This father has *two* sons! And the other son is still outside.<sup>4</sup>

And then comes the crucial moment. The parable, this parable, is not about a man with one son, but a man who had *two* sons. And this elder son is not happy. He feels neglected. He has remained faithful at home. But he has had not so much as roasted goat for him and his friends. He has toed the line and done everything asked. But at the very moment that party got rockin', he only heard only from a distance, and then second-hand, from a hired worker. No wonder he can't even call the younger one his brother. These three people are anything but reconciled. It is a reunion gone awry. The table is set. But the dinner's on hold. All is not well at the father's reconciliation table. And the reunion remains unfinished.

Deep down, we may realize that we may have finished the story prematurely. Have you ever noticed that the elder son never goes in? Even with his father's pleading and the father's own reminder that all of the remaining promised inheritance is his—still, the elder son remains outside. The parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin—they ended with parties, but the man with the two sons?: well, his party is an *unfinished reunion*. It is a place of deep pain. It is a place where people are still struggling with grace.

Have you ever seen the movie *The Color Purple* that came out in the 1980s? It's based on Alice Walker's famous novel of the same name. Well, there is a key scene in the movie *The Color Purple*—a scene that also occurs around a troubled table. Celie has been abused by her husband for far too long. But her new friend Shug comes to visit their troubled home and Celie begins to feel empowered. Around a dinner table where she had no doubt prepared the whole spread--featuring a humongous ham with a serving knife in the middle. When Shug suggests in front of the whole extended family around the dinner table that abused Celie was free to come with her, an argument ensues at the place settings. Celie's abusive husband cusses her out. But Celie won't have it. She takes the serving knife from the ham and first plants it into the wooden table. This may be a reunion scene with all signs of promise, but it is not without struggle, not without a painful, new reality between Shug, and Celie, and Celie's husband. Yet that is what the table needs to be. In the movie, the table is a painful place *and mysteriously* a gracious place where the struggle is allowed to unfold into something new.

I suppose that is why foolish people like us still gather around the table of our Lord during Lent. We know that the promise and the inheritance are there. Yet we also know the table as a place of

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<sup>4</sup> Levine argues that the father had "lost count" of his sons, *Short Stories*, 66!

struggle, where all our foolishness, and prodigalness, and meanness meets for the prospect of one more awkward, ever unfolding reunion. And what a grace it is! It gives us a table-shaped grace that still wants to have its way with us by meeting us where we are on the road and even pleading with us when we do not want to come it. It is a grace that keeps speaking to us even when we cannot stand each other--even when we fail to see brothers or sisters across racial divides or immigration chain-linked fences. We are, God knows, a foolish people, and our relationships, remain even now unhealed. Yet the party has started, and we are called to join in the struggle that is Jesus' parable of reunion: an unfinished story about a man and two sons that is still playing itself out—just like Cain and Able, like Isaac and Ishmael, like Jacob and Esau, like you and me.

I think Shug said it right in the movie. Shug noted, in so many words, that God is not pleased when we don't see the color purple. But the good news is this: *Lenten* purple is not just about me. It is about us—our difficult homecoming. An awkward reunion across all of our painful differences. And that party, is even now, just getting started.