

## **Lent 4 C 2022**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

March 27, 2022

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Friday was the Festival of the Annunciation. It commemorates an event in the Gospel According to Luke. And that event could be called “The Conception of Jesus.” Because Mary becomes pregnant. That’s why it’s March 25. It’s nine months before Christmas. “The Conception of Jesus.” Or that event could be called “The Obedience of Mary.” Because Mary said, “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*” But we call it the Annunciation. Even though the story itself does not contain the word annunciation, or annunciate, or announce, or announcement. By calling it the Annunciation, we focus the lens upon the angel Gabriel, and his message. Perhaps that is a good thing, perhaps not. But we church people ought to be careful about the words we use, especially in a society that is less familiar with the basics of Christianity than it used to be.

Today’s gospel contains a parable of Jesus. Probably one of his top two greatest hits, as far as parables go. The Good Samaritan. And this one. And just like the Festival of the Annunciation, this parable is often described using a word that is not in the story. And that word is *prodigal*. The prodigal son. And I really dislike our use of that word “prodigal.” It’s an old-timey word that entered the English language a few decades before Shakespeare was born. Shakespeare uses the word 23 times in his writings. The Bible does not. Including the King James Version. Especially the King James Version, because it contains all kinds of fancy words that we don’t use anymore. But it doesn’t use the word prodigal. And neither do any of you. None of you has ever come running up to me to tell me about the Las Vegas buffet that you went to and how prodigal it was.

And so now it’s very common for Lutherans— especially Lutheran preachers— to say, “Well, this isn’t a story about a prodigal son.” “It’s a story about a prodigal father.” So Lutherans like to take this non-biblical word which nobody ever uses except in the case of this one story, and start using it to describe a different character in the story. It’s not a prodigal son, it’s a prodigal father. Really? Can we use the word “lavish”? Or can we say *wasteful*? Or *extravagant*, or *excessive*, or *profligate*. *Immoderate*. *Improvident*. *Inordinate*. *Unrestrained*. Even *wildly generous*. All of which are words that describe the love of this father for his son. And all of which describe the love of God for each one of us. We never use the word prodigal to describe God. There are hundred of hymns in our hymnal, and just one of them uses the word prodigal for God. *Prodigal creator*, it says. Number 458 (good hymn, we ought to sing it someday).

It is a principle of Jesus that he speaks plainly. He wants plain people to understand. And it is a principle of Martin Luther, and I daresay of Protestantism, that our speech needs to be plain, so that plain people can understand this. This parable is one of Jesus' two biggest hits because it is so plain. It's rich, formidable, and well told. But it is a story of a family. And in just about every family, the parents try to set up their children for success. And often the children squander their parents' investment. There's another synonym for being prodigal— squander! This is a very plain story, even easier than the Good Samaritan, because the Good Samaritan at least requires you to understand what a Samaritan is. But this is such a good story, it doesn't even demand that of you.

Now, on the cover of your service folder, I put a painting by a Dutch master who I never heard of, and whose name I can't pronounce. I don't know anything about art, but I love this painting, because the more I look at, the more I see. And the more I see, the more I think about this parable.



What first drew me to this image was the women. Jesus' doesn't mention any women. It's a parable, it's a direct story, not a novel. But was there a Mom? Or a sister? In this painting there are two women. And one of them— and I'm sure she must be the sister— she kind of has her hand on her forehead. And I think she's just annoyed by her brother. And I should point out that

this painting is called the Departure of the Prodigal. Which by the way, in Dutch this is called “The Departure of the *Lost* Son.” The Dutch don’t use the word prodigal. Very sensible people, the Dutch. And very attuned to exactly what Jesus is talking about. Being lost.

But anyway, it’s the departure of the son. There are many paintings of the return of the son, and the Father being reunited with the son. But this is the departure of the son. And in this marvelous painting, the son has his back to his father and to his family. Which just says so much. And then what really got me, as I kept looking, was the smugness on the face of the son. He just looks so pleased with himself. This is why this artist is called a Dutch master. The son does not look arrogant or selfish or mean. He looks naive and comfortable and pleased with himself. And he’s really proud of his clothes. He’s a dandy. You can tell. And I just want to punch him in the nose. And that’s not very Christian of me, is it? To just want to smack someone because they look so privileged and so pleased with themselves. No, that’s not Christian.

And that’s when I realized what the artist has done. The artist has put me in the position of the older brother. I’m angry. I’m hostile. Already. He has even gotten out the door yet. And I’m fed up with his antics already. Now that is good art. If you look at the scene, apparently it’s the young man, the father, the mother, and the sister. Who’s missing? The older brother. You are the older brother looking at his scene. Now I don’t much about art, but this is better than any sermon preached with words.

Jesus told this story in response to an accusation. Grumbling is the word Luke uses. *This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.* These are tax-collectors, who are particularly loathed. And then also people who are generically “sinners.” Jesus is spending time with them. And having table fellowship with them. And his critics are unhappy. In the immediate context in which Jesus speaks, Jesus is like the father. Welcoming the sinners, whom Jesus refers to as the lost. And the Pharisees and the Scribes are like the resentful older brother. Why is Jesus wasting his time with tax collectors and sinners. Why is Jesus being so lavish, so wasteful, so extravagant, so... *prodigal* with these worthless people.

Now the Christian church has gone to great lengths to schedule this story during Lent. And if there is one theme of Lent, it is this: “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” So by placing this story in the season of Lent, the Church is putting its thumb on the scale and indicating that we should identify with the younger brother. The prodigal son. And that we should return to our true home, to our true father. And our true father is very lavish, very generous, perhaps even wasteful in his love for us. Our final hymn today is “Softly and Tenderly,” which is a call to come home to God. O sinner, come home.

So that’s the Lent context, the church context. Enter the story as the young son, the child who took his father’s love for granted, but now comes home to his father’s love. In contrast to the Lent context, the *Jesus* context, the context according to Luke, is asking us to decide. Will we be the older brother, or will be the father? The older brother is the better brother, but he has lost

sight of the big picture. The father sees the big picture: The son who was lost is now found. The son who was perceived as dead is now found to be alive. And that's the big picture. And it's worth celebrating. The younger son returns from a faraway land. But the older son also has to come in from the outside. To join the celebration. To be a part of God's big picture. Amen.