

## Prodigals\*

When you hear the story of the Prodigal son do you hear the gut twisting, shake us to our roots story that Jesus tells; or do you hear something like the old Tony Orlando and Dawn song: "Tie a Yellow Ribbon?"

You remember that old hit.

The man is finishing up his time in jail and writes to his sweetie that while he'll understand if she's through with him, if she's willing to give him another chance, well, he'll be coming through by bus, and he'll keep going unless he sees a yellow ribbon tied around the old oak tree.

As you know, when the bus pulls into town, the tree is full of yellow ribbons and we all tear up at the sweetness of it all.

(For those of you too young to remember the 1970's, whenever you see a magnetic yellow ribbon remembering the troops on someone's car, well, it's because of that song).

And truth be told, we often think of the story of the prodigal son like Tony's song: a wayward son goes off, doesn't know what his return will be like, and finds himself warmly welcomed.

Sweet, simple, safe.

But Jesus is not sweet, simple or safe.

Jesus is after a lot more from each and every one of us.

So let's spend a few minutes diving into the heart of this well known, but often misunderstood, story.

It's important to do so because our grasp of Christianity often faces this same struggle for understanding.

Is ours a faith of sweet and safe, or is ours a faith that shakes us to our very roots?

For example, many people see Christianity as something like this: folks are swimming at the beach when the ocean suddenly gets rough.

The lifeguard starts clearing the water.

Suddenly a boy yells out that a little girl is still in the ocean, and she's in trouble.

The lifeguard - let's call him Jesus -- races out into the ocean, grabs the little girl, who has stopped breathing.

CPR is performed and she is revived.

Everyone is pleased, everyone thanks Jesus for his heroic rescue operation, and then, folks get back to their picnics and games.

Some mention how dumb the girl was to be in the water in the first place, while others comment on her irresponsible parents, while still others will thank God that it wasn't their child who came so close to drowning.

And then everyone gets back to life as usual, no one is changed.

That is the common view of our faith.

People in trouble are rescued while the rest of us look on, throw some judgment around and then chalk it up to a good day when the rescue succeeds.

But that's not Christianity.

That's Tony Orlando.

Christianity is like this.

We still have Jesus the lifeguard warning everyone to get out of the rough surf.

We still have the boy hollering about the floundering girl.

But this time, when the lifeguard goes out to save the little girl, both lifeguard and the little girl drown.

When some people go back to the lifeguard tower, they find a note from the lifeguard saying:

"The little girl is safe in my death."

There is wonder, and there is mystery, and for those who sit with the implications of that note, are forever changed.

The story we have today is another example given by Jesus of what it means to give up to get, to let go in order to receive, to die in order to really live.

When we get serious about today's gospel, the first punch in the gut is that the father commits suicide.

You missed that part?

It's right there in the reading.

It happens right after the younger son says to his dad:

"You're dead to me now, so give me what's coming."

I remember a few years ago a friend of mine came to talk to me and her head was nearly exploding.

It seems her youngest brother demanded from her folks his inheritance, and he wanted it right now.

My friend was furious at her self-centered spoiled rotten brother.

Naturally, the parents told the boy to drop dead - he'd get his share after they died, not a minute sooner.

Which is what you'd expect from the dad in today's gospel.

But, instead of telling the upstart to drop dead: it's dad who drops dead: by dividing his living between the two boys.

I know our translation says the father "divided his **property** between them," but the actual Greek says the father "divided his **living** between them."

The father is dead to all that he was.

And then there is the older son.

At first blush, it seems we don't have a problem with the elder brother until we get to the end of the story.

But if you listen carefully, he's a problem right from the start.

He doesn't object, like my friend did, to the younger brother's demand.

In fact, he stands by and takes his share too while dear old dad is still walking around, and we know this because the dad "divided his living **between** them."

We'll get back to the older brother soon.

So the story begins with the dad dying, giving up all he has.

No yellow ribbons so far.

Meanwhile, Junior is off to Reno having cashed in dad's living.

Junior is in a hurry to sell everything quickly because in small villages like these, word travels fast; and you can imagine what the neighbors think about this kid and his self-centered scheme.

As you know, he blows what he has and ends up in pretty much the worst spot a Jewish boy can end up in: broke, in the midst of a famine, with no family to help out.

As it says in the Greek, he “glues himself” to a pagan pig farmer and is not only tending pigs (a huge NO NO for his culture), he’s thinking how wonderful it would be **to be a pig**, so he can eat their food!

But as bad as things are, he's still hanging on, to pride, ego and control.

Plan A is figuring out how to fill his stomach by somehow wheedling his way back into dad’s good graces.

So he comes up with this: “I have sinned against heaven and against you!”

And, if that doesn’t do the trick, he figures he’ll end with: “treat me as a hired servant!”

So off he goes, and when he appears over the horizon, the father does what no self-respecting Middle Eastern man would ever do - he hikes up his robe, exposes his legs, and dashes for his son: falling on his neck, kissing him....

The boy blurts out his confession of sin - but he doesn’t even get to the part of being treated as a servant -- not because the father cuts him off, but because - in the face of the overwhelming love poured out by the father - the boy finally and at long last dies to the illusion that he can have some life other than being his father's son.

He died as a son when he began this whole sorry mess.

Planning his comeback, he thinks he can recreate himself — into a servant.

But now, he sees that the only life he can ever or will ever have - is solely and exclusively as a son — solely and exclusively — because the father loves him.

He exists only in and because of and through the father's love.

Without the father's love, he is nothing.

Which was always the case — but only now can he see the truth that was always there, right before his eyes, a truth made visible once he has died to his illusions of control and self-sufficiency.

It's not yellow ribbons that get us home, it's dying to our obsessions with power and control.

So the dead dad, whose dead son is now wearing the finest robe and the signet ring and some marvelous red shoes, head for the biggest party of the year - where the neighbors, following the father's lead, welcome the son back home with music and laughter and song.

Which leaves us with the one character who isn't yet dead: the Boy Scout, Mr. Prim and Proper, yes, the older son.

After grilling the neighborhood boys about the cause of all the ruckus, he begins to pout.

He's supposed to be in the party, greeting his dad's guests, schmoozing with the neighbors and at least pretending to have a good time: his culture demands that, even if he is mad.

But he won't.

So out comes dad, who leaves the party, (a huge embarrassment in those days), made all the worse by older son fanning the flames of a family feud in front of the guests.

But dad doesn't berate the insolent son.

He pleads with him in love; while right before our eyes, amazing transformations are taking place.

The younger son, who has died, is transformed from a servant into a son, while the older son, who refuses to die to his own wounded ego, is transformed from a son into a servant!

"All these years I've been working as a slave for you, and I can't get a goat sandwich much less the veal that's roasting for that son of yours!" he shouts, and in the shouting, denouncing his sonship - apparently forgetting that he's already the owner of the whole estate - ever since Junior left for Reno - and what he fails to see is that the veal is being cooked not because dad loves Junior more, but because dad is simply over the moon with joy!

There the story ends, with one of the three characters still not dead, still demanding his "rights", still living in the fantasy that he is in charge of his destiny.

And the question that Jesus leaves hanging is:

Will he die to his ego and pride and sense of entitlement and join the party or will he remain outside, alone and angry?



That's the question Jesus leaves with us.

But there is one more thing.

There's one more death we need to face.

It's the death of the Jesus character in the story.

Of all the characters in the story, which one is most like Jesus?

I suggest to you that Jesus, in this story, is the fatted calf.

The one who is slaughtered so those who are willing to die can have the party in the first place.

That's not my opinion, it's right there, in the Book of Revelation:

"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were slaughtered, and at the cost of your own blood you have purchased for God those from every tribe and language and people and nation. Rev. 5:6

Jesus is the fatted calf.

Like the little girl who drowned with the lifeguard, we are safe in his death.

By his death, we are alive!

We hear this story in Lent because it's during Lent that our attention is directed most often, most profoundly, to dying.

And so perhaps we might ask this morning: to what do I need to die?

What pride or arrogance or wounded feeling or sense of entitlement or self-righteous anger or fear do I need to die to?

And on a broader note: what nationalism or consumerism or sexism or stinginess or racism do I need to die to; so that, arm in arm with the once dead and now risen younger brother, with the once dead and now risen dad, we too might finally be ready to dance on in to the greatest party ever thrown!

It's going on just down the street, right around the corner -- in that raucous banquet hall called -- the Kingdom of God!

+amen

\*This sermon steals shamelessly from the wonderful insights by the late Fr Bob Capon, may he rest in peace.