

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
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“Humans are a risk-taking species,” says psychologist Dr. Marvin Zuckerman. “The hunting of large and dangerous game by men required a type of thrill- and adventure-seeking that also contributes to the success of the human race. Over the millennia, men also found in combat and war and outlet for their need for adventure...This does not mean that individuals don’t differ in the degree in which they have that trait.” Too little risk-taking brings about stagnation, and too much risk-taking, after all, leads to an early death.¹ We might call that consistent, routine-based person on one end of the scale boring, while we could call the daredevil, jobless person on the other end of the scale reckless.

Today’s gospel reading is mostly about recklessness. In fact, the popular descriptive phrase for this reading is “the story of the prodigal son.” One scholar notes that prodigal means “recklessly extravagant.” So, with that title we might naturally keep our eyes fixed on the younger son in today’s reading. It’s also important to remember that the title “prodigal son” is not something the author attributes to the story, nor does Jesus. The title is an editor’s bias, and so perhaps today we can try to look at the parable with new eyes and an open mind. With that said, let’s dive in.

The parable opens with the younger of two sons asking for his inheritance while the father is still alive. This is rude and scandalous. The son is saying, in effect, “You are as good as dead to me.” The father agreeing to it then, escalates the scandal! And not only the father is involved, the oldest son also accepts his share too.

A few days after this exchange, the youngest son packs his bags and sets off to a distant land. While he’s in this distant land he’s “making it rain,” spending everything, and

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200011/are-you-risk-taker>

eventually the property he owns falls into the hands of a foreigner. This, now, if everything else hasn't communicated it, this is textbook reckless. This son *is* a prodigal son. Giving the property to a foreigner now turns the whole story from one of individual recklessness to one that jeopardizes his whole family and community back home. Their owning of land is different than the way we easily sell homes and land here in Chicago. For them, community survival required trust along with the careful balancing of obligations and debts. Land ownership and proximity to another trusted owner was critical. All of which would be jeopardized by the presence of a foreigner owning property.²

This younger son now has nothing. He's down on his luck, down in the dumps, and knee deep in a muddy pigpen. Here is this Jewish lad tending to pigs – in the Jewish mindset these are ritually unclean, disgusting pigs.

Well in that muddy, religiously distant, and foreign place – it's there he has an epiphany, a “come to Jesus” kind of moment. That's an experience I've had. For sometimes it's in the darkest, loneliness, most wretched place where we begin to see more clearly. So, this younger son decides to head home to work for his father for a daily wage. He *can* go back to the community, but he will have to live as an outsider.

The young man pulls himself out of the mud and makes this journey back home. Without knowing why the younger son is returning, the father sees him in the distance, and *runs* to greet him before the villagers drive him off. Run is a keyword. In Middle Eastern culture a man, a father, a superior would never run. Running would heap shame and dishonor on the father. To run would be reckless.

Then, after the reckless father runs to meet his irresponsible son, the son makes a pseudo-confession. The father responds in an extreme manner by giving the son a robe, a ring, and sandals. With this action, the younger son is recognized as the father's son once again. If we end the scene here we clearly can understand the editor's title “the prodigal son.” This is the point where we could wrap it up and say, “That's a nice story, actually a classic story, about forgiveness and repentance.” For up to this point we read the story as

² <http://www.holytextures.com/2010/02/luke-15-1-3-11b-32-year-c-lent-4-sermon.html>

a beautiful example of grace and how, with repentance, we can receive God's grace with open arms. However, we're not quite done with the story yet.

Enter the older son. He's coming back from working in the fields. The older son finds out they're having a massive celebration for the younger son, and the older son is peeved. After all, he's been working hard and his younger brother appears to get more than what he has received. The older son is sulking and then the father comes to the older son, which is a big deal. The father doesn't respectfully call a servant to fetch his son, or make the son come to him; no, yet again the father recklessly goes to his son against all customs and good order and social-cultural norms. The father reminds his son that everything the father owns is still his; there is more than enough for all. Now, end scene.

It's a reckless parable today; almost every character is rash in their actions. The sons are thoughtless. The younger son selfishly takes his inheritance and spends it. The older son doesn't care about reconciliation of the relationship between his younger brother and the community. Instead the older son is humiliated for his father because of the way things should be, according to the socio-cultural norms of their community. On the flip side, the father is recklessly gracious. The father doesn't let social cultural norms, or "the way it's always been done," or the fear of shame, or anything else stand in the way of his wild, extravagant love and grace. He is a prodigal father.

If we set these reckless characters in the context of why Jesus is sharing this story in the first place, then this emphasis on grace becomes obvious. One way to understand this parable is found in the few short verses that begin today's periscope. We must remember that Jesus is talking to the Pharisees and the scribes who were grumbling because Jesus was welcoming sinners and tax collectors. And in addition to that, Jesus was doing something intimate, something that you do with *friends* – he was eating with them! Jesus is doing something new. Jesus is being gracious with all people. Jesus shows the religious leaders that the reign of God is about a reckless welcome of all people.

And so, this “parable ends with the implicit question: will the Pharisees and scribes join Jesus in welcoming and eating with sinners?”³ And that same question rings true for us today as Christians; will we join Jesus in welcoming and eating with sinners? Will we recklessly embrace *and* reflect God’s grace and welcome?

Now, to be clear, reckless welcome and reckless grace is not uncalculated or harmful. In this context, I would argue, recklessness means taking a chance centered in God’s mission and identity. It means a calculated approach to respond with our God-given baptismal identity. Okay, so with that, the question might be, “What might that look like?” Well, one faith community had this response:

The board of Union Theological Seminary gathered together in 2014 to look at their \$108 million dollar endowment. The seminary was worried about the ways their actions contribute to global warming and the large amounts of carbon dioxide and other green house gases in the atmosphere. So, the board voted to divest their endowment from fossil fuel companies. They realized that their endowment alone would hardly cause fossil fuel giants to miss even half a heartbeat. However, the seminary’s president, Serene Jones, said, “as a seminary dedicated to social justice we have a critical call to live out our values in the world.It’s on moral ground that we pursue divestment, and on theological grounds that we trust that it matters.” She said, “The Christian term for this reckless hope in the power of God to use our decisions of conscience to transform the world is *resurrection*, and I have faith in the power of resurrection.”⁴ A seminary’s reckless hope and the power of the resurrection. The reckless grace of a prodigal father. The reckless welcome of our loving God.

Where are we reckless with love and grace in this world? Today the good news is that whether you’re like the older son and have been faithfully working and wondering

³ Hoppe, Leslie J. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*. “Fourth Sunday in Lent, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32, Exegetical Perspective.”

⁴ <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-07/faith-communities-are-dumping-their-fossil-fuel-investments>

when you'll be noticed, or whether you're like the younger son and have made some careless, hasty decision, God loves you. God is recklessly gracious. Our God is recklessly loving. Our God leads us to a reckless hope. For our God loves you madly, deeply, truly, and abundantly.

Friends, remember your identity in baptism to work for justice and peace. Come to this table and be strengthened by the grace of God, who loves you beyond measure. Then, go out into the world this day being reckless with your grace and your love. Amen.