

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
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“Prodigal”

Rev. William Utke  
Emanuel UCC, HC

Perhaps you are familiar with the song, “The Hokey Pokey,” and the dizzying dance that goes along with it. This week I learned the “Hokey Pokey” is known in the UK and New Zealand as the “Hokey Cokey.” It originated as a British Folk Dance with variations found as early as 1826. The same song is called the “Boogie, Woogie” in Denmark, and the “Boogie, Boogie” in the Philippines, the dance and song are known in many parts of the world.

The Iowa Hawkeye football team would perform the song under Coach Hayden Fry after a big win like beating Ohio State. Virginia Tech’s marching band plays the “Hokey Pokey” after the third quarter as the crowd joins the Tuba section doing the movements.

Let’s sing a verse together using our “right hand:” “You put your right hand in, you take your right hand out, you put your right hand in and you shake it all about, you do the hokey pokey and your turn yourself around. That’s what it’s all about.”

With the help of God I hope we will feel as though we have “Put our whole self in and turned our self around” inside the parable of the Prodigal.

Let me begin defining some characteristics common to many of Jesus’ parables. Parables are usually brief and include characters and elements that are common to the audience. As well, parables are meant to hold up a mirror in which Jesus invites the listener to honestly and genuinely place themselves within the story. And Parables usually have a reversal of “common sense” which calls the audience to grow into stronger disciples.

Next, let me clear up the term “prodigal.” As a child I was taught the word “prodigal” indicated someone who wasted their life away in sin, like the younger brother in the parable. But the word can also describe any person who is wastefully extravagant with money, or resources, or love, it doesn’t have to be spending these in sin. We hear this in the bumper sticker inviting us to “Practice Random acts of kindness and senseless beauty.” So Prodigal doesn’t just mean recklessly sinning, it is giving ourselves away in any way in which many people would find foolish or risky.

So I invite us to put our whole self in and turn yourself around as we glance in on each character in this parable.

The younger son, turns his back on his family, his community and his religious heritage goes off to some place with the tagline, “What happens here, stays here.” He wastefully spends his inheritance on wine and women. No responsibilities. No concern how he has hurt anyone. He has run off until all his stress, and responsibilities melt away on a sunny beach somewhere. But we know the problems never melt away forever, and in that kind of irresponsibility the

problems usually return with far more serious consequences, in the case of this son, life or death.

I think we would agree the younger son doesn't know who he is, he has no goals, he isn't trying to live by the rules of proper society. We can doll it up and try to call him an "Urban Camper" but really he is a hungry, lost, hobo... a bum, an utter embarrassment to his family and hometown by any standards. He is going to become a drain on our social service system, he is going to cost us taxes, and who knows if he will ever realize he needs to play by the proper rules. He has hokey pokey'd without thinking of the consequences to anyone.

The Eldest Son is in line with our expectations; trustworthy, faithful, responsible, well behaved, he keeps his inheritance secure. He is the kind of child we dream our children will be. He has worked day after day and asked for nothing. He has shown complete respect and obedience to his father. What else is there to say, the older son has been a model citizen. Everyone likes and respects him. His loyalty to his Father may have allowed the family a level of redemption in a town where the talk on the street is still about the younger son's embarrassing secret life.

Then the Father, who may be the real "prodigal" here, is filled with abundant, scandalous love. A love which defies earthly rules and conventions. This Father dares to offer Grace that surprises and offends us. This Father is amazing. Any typical Palestinian Father would have felt such shame at his younger son he would have disowned him. Not this one. A Palestinian Patriarch would never run out and shower a lost son with a ring, a robe, a kiss and a banquet. But this one does.

And this subversive love is not just for the younger son. The older son's sulking keeps him from coming to the party. This would have been a sign of disobedience and brought great shame upon the Father. Yet this amazing Parent endures this humiliation as well. He abandons the guests at the party, a horrible breach of etiquette, and "goes out" to the older son who can't even see his own sins of pride, jealousy and self-righteousness. But the Father doesn't scold him, and he doesn't defend the younger brother's decisions, he offers the pouting son, a loving invite to the party.

When have we been the younger brother who epitomizes a depth of our sin we don't often care to admit? And, when are we the older brother deciding some are simply deserving of their fate, and outside the bounds of Grace and forgiveness? When have we been the Father, reckless and wasteful with our love no matter what?

In this story the Father repeatedly turns the attention away from the actions of both sons, to his own unbelievable love and bounty.

There are some rarely sung stanzas to the popular church hymn, "There's a wideness in God's Mercy," that apply to our story today. We may know the stanzas about the "wideness of God's

mercy being like the wideness of the sea, the kindness of God's justice being more than liberty." But here are some lesser known verses...

"But we make God's love too narrow, by false limits of our own; and we magnify God's strictness, with a zeal God will not own. Was there ever kinder shepherd, half so gentle, half so sweet. As the savior who would have us, come and gather at his feet?"

Chapter 15 of Luke's gospel begins with the Pharisees and Scribes complaining that Jesus eats with sinners. And it ends with a Father welcoming home his erring son, and a plea for the self-righteous elder son to join his neighbors and younger brother for a banquet... marking the restoration of proper relations among members of the family and the wider community. We might wonder if this is Jesus' way of asking the Pharisees and Scribes if they will join him in welcoming and eating with the other half of the crowd gathered as he tells the story, the sinners! Or will these pillars of proper etiquette and self-justification act like the elder son, separating themselves from the sinners.

During any given day, week, or year, we see ourselves in all three of these characters. We all can become lost in fields of sin and bad choices, but we all can also become lost in fields of self-justification and jealousy. Then there are the times we offer boundary breaking, barrier shattering, prodigal love, which is the only thing that breaks the other two cycles.

In his book God has a Dream, Desmond Tutu writes,

I have a dream, God says. Please help me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that my children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family.

That is the dizzying, hokey pokey dance of God's amazing, unbelievable, scandalous, awesome Grace which is offered to each of us as well. This morning Jesus has set before us the table for both the sinners and the self-righteous, will you come to the party?

Amen

