

# Sermons at St. Paul's

*A Wellspring of Spiritual Nourishment; A River of Service in Jesus' Name*

**March 14, 2010, The Fourth Sunday of Lent  
The Reverend Nancy Burton Dilliplane**

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In the name of the One, Holy and Triune God, Amen.

Are you here for the party? Why are you sitting there looking like it's the middle of Lent? Do I have the wrong reading? Wait, let me check... "A certain man had two sons..." No, that's the reading I have. It's called "The Parable of the Great Big Hairy Outrageous Party."

Maybe the problem is that most of us grew up knowing this parable by a different title: "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." When we view this story of Jesus' through *that* title, it is much better suited for Lent than my parable about a wild party.

And by that title—the Prodigal Son—we know this story pretty well. If I asked you to tell me the story of the Prodigal Son, most you could probably give me the outline with very little trouble. A man has two sons. One day, the younger son asks the father to give him his share of the family estate early. The father does so, and the younger son leaves town. Before long he has used up all his money. It doesn't help that there is a famine in the land where he now lives. The younger son is reduced to caring for pigs (what a job for a good Jewish boy!) and eating the pigs' food just to stay alive.

The younger son realizes that even the hired hands back home have life easier than he does. So he devises a plan to return to his father and be taken back as a servant. At least he'll have a roof over his head and a full belly. Young Son even rehearses a speech that might help pave the way. "Father," he'll say, "I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

But as the young man is returning home, while he is still just a dot on the horizon, the father sees him coming and runs to meet him. Young Son cannot even get the words of his rehearsed speech out of his mouth before the father has flung wide his arms in welcome. The father dresses him in a fine robe. He puts sandals on his feet (a sign that he is welcomed as a free man, not a slave) and puts a signet ring on his finger (perhaps a ring bearing the seal of the father's own word and authority). The young man is received home as a son, not a hired hand.

That's the story that most of us think of when we hear the title "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." And it's a great story for Lent.

Those of us who have ever done something in our lives that had disastrous consequences, and then changed course, will find ourselves in the story of the younger son. We recognize in him the truth of our own experience—the futility of living without God; the need to come to ourselves and see that our lives are on the wrong track; the need to repent and return to the Lord; the need we all have to return home.

During Lent, the Parable of the Prodigal Son reminds us of our own lostness, our own need to be restored to life by a loving God. We move our confession to the start of worship, we wear purple and we do our best to be sorry and ask to be taken back into the household of God. The Ash Wednesday liturgy reminds us that this *is* part of the purpose of Lent: it is a time when those who have been separated from the body of the faithful are reconciled by penitence and forgiveness and restored to the fellowship of the Church. The Prodigal Son's story leads us to beg to be accepted back into the household of God. Certainly there is truth in this story. The prodigal son is a kindred lost and wandering soul.

But the story that Jesus tells includes another brother, as well. Remember that part of the story? The older son—the one who has stayed faithfully at home all these years, working on the father's estate, following all the rules, doing what was expected of him at every turn, being a good son—returns from working in the fields and hears the sounds of a party in full swing. (I knew there was a party in here somewhere!) When the older son finds out that his good for nothing younger brother has returned and the party is for *him*, he goes ballistic. “How come he gets a party after all he's done? I've been here all along working like a slave for you! How come you never had a party for me?”

You know, whenever I hear this story, I empathize with that rule-following older son. I'm an elder child myself, and I know what it's like to have a younger sister simply assume the freedoms and privileges that I myself had to work for and earn as if they were her due, and at a much younger age at that. As a child, I never met a rule that I didn't try to keep. Deep inside, I still expect to be rewarded, and I'm vexed by those who seem to profit by breaking the rules.

And it occurs to me that I am looking at a church full of older sons. After all, you are the ones who are here on a Sunday morning rather than at Starbucks with the Sunday Times. You are the ones who give your money and your time to the church, who show up with pruning shears on work days, with pastries for coffee hour, with prayers for pastoral care meetings, with acumen and responsibility for finance committee meetings. You are the ones on whom the church relies. Don't you, like I do, have some secret empathy for that older son as well? We are the ones who never left home!

And Lent is a perfect season for us elder children. If we admit it, there is something about the fasting, almsgiving, and ramped up praying and spiritual discipline that we find very reassuring. Look how *well* we are keeping this holy season of Lent! See how faithful and obedient we are! There is something very older-sonish about abstaining from something that gives us pleasure, or giving to the United Thank Offering, or to relief work in Haiti, or taking on a Lenten study.

But that older brother is every bit as lost as the younger brother. Every bit as prodigal. What does prodigal mean, anyway? It's a word that we don't use much, except in connection with this

parable, and as a result it seems to have bad—dissolute—connotations. In actuality, the term is really value neutral. It means wasteful or extravagant. The younger son has wasted his fortune and he has wasted his sonship by leaving home. The older son has *also* wasted his fortune and his sonship—by viewing his relationship with his father as that of a slave to his master: “I’ve worked like a slave for you! I’ve never disobeyed your commands.”

If the younger son appears this fourth Sunday in Lent to recall us from our wandering ways, maybe the elder son appears in Lent to show us the error of assuming that we can merit God’s love and favor. Maybe he lets us give voice to a resentment we hardly dare to admit—sometimes in our labors for the kingdom we feel more like slaves than God’s free children. The elder brother exposes our propensity to be hard hearted and self-righteous in our rule keeping. He shows us what it looks like to pride ourselves on how well we are doing living by all the rules. He may even bring us up short by the realization that we can’t bear to call the rule breakers “brother”. “That son of yours” he calls the younger, rule breaking son, not “my brother.”

Both sons are prodigal. Both extravagantly disregard the bonds of family. Both waste the love of the father. Both sons show me my wastefulness and brokenness. They expose me in both my rule breaking *and* my rule keeping. Is that what these prodigal brothers are doing here in the middle of Lent? Waiting to make me feel bad? If that’s the case, they are doing a splendid job job! I am and have been the extravagant, wayward, wandering rule breaking younger son. I have been and am the wasteful, resentful, hard-hearted, rule keeping older son. I get it already! I’m dust!

But wait. I KNOW I began this sermon with the idea of a party. Somehow I’m forgetting that. And I’m forgetting that there is another character in the story—the father! And, considering how Jesus begins his story--There was a *man*—I wonder if maybe the character of the father isn’t the one that Jesus wants us to pay attention to. How quick we are to focus on those two prodigal sons, when the father might just be the most prodigal of all. He is extravagant and wasteful beyond measure. He gives half his fortune away, and when it is gone, he welcomes the one who spent it to become his son once more, and throws a huge party to celebrate the fact. He runs out to meet the older son as well, flinging his arms wide in an invitation to come in and join the party. Both rule-breaker and rule-keeper are welcome at this party! This father is a complete and utter spendthrift, giving away all he has to both beloved sons, as he gives his love away to *all* those whom he loves—to all of us. All he asks is that we all join the party.

So I think that we get this story smack in the middle of Lent, not to remind us of our prodigal brokenness, but to remind us of God’s prodigal love. This is a story about the wasteful, extravagant yearning of God to seek out and find the lost, and the party that ensues when each lost soul returns home. This is the story of God who gives without counting the cost, who *must* rejoice in finding the lost. Is it possible that Lent is a party? That our return from rule breaking, and even our Lenten rule keeping—our almsgiving, fasting, prayer and study are meant to be full of celebration and joy? Welcome to Lent! Come in and join the big, hairy, outrageous party.

In fact, Jesus told this story to explain why he always seemed to be found at a party himself. Sinners and tax collectors—the broken, wayward, wanderers and prodigals of the world—were coming to him, and he welcomed them and ate with them. He celebrated their coming and met

them with joy. And when the scribes and the Pharisees criticized him for it, he responded with a series of parables. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is just the final one in the series. First there is the story of the shepherd who loses a sheep. Then there is the story of the woman who loses a coin. Then there is the story of a father who loses his sons. In each story the seeker searches for the lost with a wasteful, extravagant urgency. And in each story the joy of the finder cannot be contained when the lost is found. The seeker's joy results in a huge party to which everyone is invited. ***The seeker and the party are the focus of these stories.*** God's prodigal, seeking love and grace find their fullest expression in a party. And God insists that we must celebrate and rejoice, too.

And you know something? None of these parables is finished. We don't know whether the invitation to the party will be accepted. We don't know how the story turns out. The scene fades to black before we find out whether his friends come to the party of the shepherd, whether the woman's neighbors come to her freshly swept house to share her joy. We don't know whether the elder brother is going to go in to the party, or not. We are left with a freeze frame of God's eager waiting for everyone to join the party.

The climax of the parable is still waiting to happen. The party is in full swing. With that as a backdrop, the father stands with open arms waiting to welcome all of us home again—rule breakers and rule keepers alike. The parable won't be complete until all of us are inside, until there is a single, reconciled, partying community gathered under the banner of God's prodigal love, until all respond to God's insistent invitation to celebrate and rejoice for those who were dead have come to life, those who were lost have been found.

So, let me ask you again...are you here for the party?

Amen.