

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

I. The Forgiving Father

A. Feeling footloose and frisky, a feather-brained fellow forced his father to fork over his farthings.

1. Fast he flew to foreign fields and frittered his family's fortune, feasting fabulously with floozies and faithless friends.

2. Flooded with flattery, he financed a full-fledged fling of "funny foam" and fast food.

3. Fleeced by his fellows in folly, facing famine, and feeling faintly fuzzy, he found himself a feed-flinger in a filthy foreign farmyard.

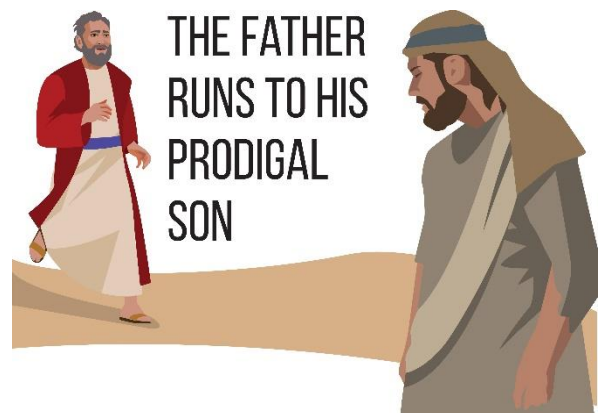
4. Feeling frail and fairly famished, he fain would have filled his frame with foraged food from the fodder fragments.

5. "Fooley," he figured, "My father's flunkies fair far fancier," the frazzled fugitive fumed feverishly, facing the facts.

6. Finally, frustrated from failure and filled with foreboding (but following his feelings) he fled from the filthy foreign farmyard.

7. Faraway, the Father focused on the fretful familiar form in the field and flew to him and fondly flung his forearms around the fatigued fugitive

8. Falling at his Father's feet, the fugitive floundered forlornly,



“Father, I have flunked and fruitlessly forfeited family favor.”

9. Finally, the faithful Father, forbidding and forestalling further flinching, frantically flagged the Flunkies to fetch forth the finest fatling and fix a feast.

B. Faithfully, the Father’s First-born was in a fertile field fixing fences while the Father and the Fugitive were feeling festive.

1. The Foreman felt fantastic as he flashed the fortunate news of a familiar family face that had forsaken fatal foolishness.

2. Forty-Four feet from the farmhouse the First-born found a farmhand fixing a fatling.

3. Frowning and finding fault, he found Father and fumed, “Floozy and foam from frittered family funds and you fix a feast following the Fugitive’s folderol?”

4. The First-born felt it was fitting to feel “Favored” for his faithfulness and fidelity to family, father and farm.

5. In foolhardy fashion, he faulted the Father for failing to furnish a fatling and feast for his friends.

6. His folly was not in feeling fit for feast and fatling for friends, rather his flaw was in his feeling about the fairness of the festival for the found Fugitive.

7. His fundamental fallacy was a fixation on favoritism, not forgiveness.

8. Any focus on feeling “favored” will fester and friction will force the frayed façade to fall.

9. Frankly, the Father felt the frigid First-born’s frugality of forgiveness was formidable and frightful.

10. But the Father's former faithful fortitude and fearless forbearance to forgive for Fugitive and First-born flourishes.

11. The farsighted Father figured, "Such fidelity is fine, but what forbids fervent festivity for the Fugitive that is found?"

12. Unfurl the flags and finery, let fun and frolic freely flow.

13. "Former failure is forgotten, folly is forsaken.

14. "Forgiveness forms the foundation for future fortune."

C. The Four facets of the Father's fathomless fondness for Fugitives are:

1. Forgiveness
2. Forever faithful friendship
3. Fadeless love, and
4. A facility for forgetting flaws.

II. Three Prodigals

A. A familiar story with a fun and different twist.

- Entitled "The Prodigal Son in the key of F"

- and originally written by John Garlock and Gwen Jones in the 1940's

1. We know the how this parable has been allegorized: the Fugitive represents the Sinners, the First-born is the Righteous, and the Father is God.

2. Yet, if we look closely at this story we see that in reality, the Father lost **both** Sons:

- One to a foreign country

- The other to Self-righteousness

3. Like a rebellious Teenager, the Younger Son took off for a distant country – far away from the restraints and obligations of the Family –

- where he squandered his wealth in "Wild Living."

4. Some would say that by asking for his inheritance he was essentially telling his Father, “You are as good as dead to me. You’re worth more to me dead than alive.”

5. Yet, finally, “He came to his senses,” not because of someone’s argument or ethical exhortation, but out of sheer desperation and hunger.

- At the end of his rope, he resolved to return home and throw himself humbly upon his Father’s mercy.

B. Now his Older Brother was equally as far away from home and family, without ever leaving the Family Farm.

1. He devoted himself dutifully to his Father’s service, never disobeying a command of his Father, and thought, no doubt, that he was the model of unselfishness.

- Yet, he himself was the center of his every thought, so that he was incapable of entering sympathetically into his Father’s joys and sorrows.

2. He did all the right things – but for the wrong reason.

- He was wasting his Father’s love as much as his brother was wasting his Father’s money, because his heart was so hard and calculating.

3. And as a result, he refused to join in the music and dancing, because of his envy of a Brother who had broken from the family and returned, while he remained loyally at home.

4. He failed to realize what his Brother had come to learn: that he too was encompassed in the Father’s love.

C. In reality there are **THREE Prodigals** in this story.

1. The word **Prodigal** literally means “extravagant,” “wasteful,” “spendthrift,” and that can apply to all three.

2. First there is the **Younger Son**, running through his inheritance as though it were water and ending up in the depression that always follows the abuse of freedom.

3. Second, there is the **Older Brother**, performing his tasks dutifully – though perhaps lovelessly – and squandering months or even years of opportunity to get to know the real meaning of home and Sonship.

4. And then there is the **Father** himself.

5. Look at what he does – when the Prodigal returns home, **he runs** to greet him – no father in Jesus' day would do such an undignified thing, especially to a son who had treated him so poorly.

6. And when the Older Son won't come to him, **he goes out to him**, again very uncharacteristic of a Father to whom was owed undying honor and respect.

7. But the Father does these things – and so does God for us.

III. Faithfulness of the Father

A. Yet, to simplify this parable into an allegory is to rob it of its true power.

1. We have only to look at the first three verses to put this parable in its context – I mean they tacked them on for a reason, didn't they?

2. Look at those opening verses, the Pharisees and Scribes are grumbling at Jesus because he is welcoming and eating with known sinners.

3. To their way of thinking, unconditional forgiveness appears to be condoning the sinful behavior.

4. But what we really see here is that God is always eager to receive those who have wandered away.

5. God's mercy goes beyond our human concepts of how God should act toward sinners.

B. This parable reveals to us the true nature of God, who is like the loving and welcoming father who runs to greet his wayward children with loving arms and acceptance.

1. Yet, over the years, somehow God has come to be seen as small, narrow, harsh, judgmental, and mean – and that’s the nature of God that is portrayed to other people.

2. Well, who would want to “come home” to a God like that?

3. That’s NOT the God Jesus portrayed – and it is not the depiction of God that we are to portray either.

4. This is a story about God’s **extravagant** and **unconditional** LOVE offered freely to all.

C. So where do we fit into all this?

1. How often do WE, like the Older Son, cut ourselves off from our FATHER’S love?

2. Whether in selfishness, or righteous indignation, or in pain and questioning – how often do we cut ourselves off from the love of God?

3. And yet, what this story tells us is that the Father is always there, watching for us – WAITING for us – ready to throw his arms around us in love before we can even get a word out.

4. This story is about God’s **unconditional** and **extravagant** love offered freely for both Sons – and if it is given to them, then the Father’s love is there for us too.

5. All we have to do is to **believe** it and **accept** it – and perhaps that’s the hardest thing to do of all.

D. And once we **believe** it and **accept** it – we are called to share it.

1. We are all called to share the news of God’s wonderful love to all we know.

2. To share the message that God DOES love us – exactly as we are – so we don’t need to try and turn ourselves into someone else – instead we need to be the best “me I can be.”

3. This is the message we are called to share and to live out in the community, shining forth God's love to those we meet and acting as if – to borrow St. Paul's phrase from our NT lesson – we truly are **AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST**.

4. Think about that.

5. Now, what does an **AMBASSADOR** do?

6. An **AMBASSADOR** **tells** people things;

-An **AMBASSADOR** represents their country or a specific activity.

7. Well, **WE** are **AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST** – we are to tell people all about God's costly, abundant, never-ending love for them.

Conclusion

Over the last few Sundays, we have heard of God wanting to act like a **mother bird** who gathers her children under her wings;

- as a nurturing **Gardner** looking for the fruits of repentance;

- and as a **Loving Parent** who races to meet his wandering children when they return home.

We are called to be **AMBASSADORS** of that God – inviting people into a relationship with the God who loves them;

- who loves them like a **Mother bird**, a **Gardner**, a **waiting parent** – waiting to welcome them home.

That's **WHAT** we are, **AMBASSADORS** of **that** God – **AMBASSADORS** of **this** Church – standing with arms outstretched ready to say, "Welcome home!"



Welcome!

Let Us Pray

Thanksgiving, blessing and praise be yours, God of the Incarnation; for you care for us and for our prayer, as a loving parent cares for a child. May our love for you and our likeness to you be strengthened every time we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **AMEN.**

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