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*Prayer for Illumination: Almighty God, in a world that is rapidly changing and causing many to fear, we come to you and your word, as Christians throughout the ages have done, to be challenged by your call, and to be comforted by your love. Grant us ears to hear your word today. Amen.*

As I sat with my group of students sipping coffee in the Belfast, Northern Ireland airport, the rain came down in sheets of the terminal windows. Because of the severe weather, our flight was delayed a little at a time, first 20 min., then 30 min., and eventually, we knew we would miss our connecting flight out of London's Heathrow Airport. At the point at which we knew we weren't going to make our connecting flight home to the US, we had to decide if we would stay in Belfast for another day or take our chances in London. We chose the latter, figuring that we would at least be closer to home. Once in London, I found an airline representative and shared our plight. As good fortune would have it, and in a development that I'd never before and never since seen, the airline said they would put the 12 of us up overnight near Heathrow. As one would expect, a hotel near Heathrow was not cheap. Each room billed out at \$800 per night. And this was 20 years ago when \$800 was real money! (ha!).

My students thought I had worked some kind of magic for these accommodations. I didn't correct them. After we put our bags in the very modest rooms, we met down in the hotel restaurant for dinner.

And for as modest as the rooms were, the all-you-could-ever-want buffet was probably the fanciest restaurant that I have ever dined in. A sea of steak and lobster and every imaginable soup, salad, side dish, and dessert. Everyone was amazed. The food was plentiful and delicious, and we lamented that we only were able to eat one dinner and one breakfast. If you asked those students today, they would all concur that we had a *lavish* dinner and a *lavish* breakfast.

The food was sumptuous, extravagant, abundant. You could even say it was wastefully extravagant. These were two very lavish, *prodigal* meals.

Of course, you recognize the word "prodigal" from our text today, the famous parable of Jesus's. As a kid growing up, I assumed it meant some kind of repentant return to right relationship. That's a good thing, of course, and what the parable promotes. But the word "prodigal" comes from the Latin *prodigus*, meaning "wasteful" or "recklessly extravagant." and goes back to the 4th or 5th c. The younger son was a prodigal son

because he wasted his inheritance on reckless and immoral living, squandering everything and ending up destitute and slopping the hogs.

More recently, scholars have called the story the “Parable of the Merciful Father,” which of course, is true, but as you see, I’ve titled my sermon the Prodigal *Family*, which includes the older brother. The standoff-ish, smug, irritated, joyless, bitter older brother.

More on them in a bit, but first, it’s essential to understand the CONTEXT of the parable of the prodigal family, which is often overlooked and underappreciated. Jesus tells the parable to illustrate a central point, to answer a central question, can you remember it from my reading moments ago?

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathered around to hear Jesus.

This is a big uh-oh. Tax collectors were dishonest thieves who earned their living by overcharging as they collected taxes from their own people.

Sinners were lawbreakers who were impure and didn’t follow the 613 laws in the Hebrew Bible. They were the wrong kind of people.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law—aka the “right” kind of people in their own minds —muttered, and said:

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

He hangs out with them. Fellowships with them. Talks with them. Listens to them.

And the religious leaders, the ones with power, grumble about Jesus sitting at table with the wrong kind of people.

So, then, the texts says, Jesus told them this parable,

Jesus tells these religiously certain,

supremely-confident-in-their-version-of-the-truth people, this parable...

And actually he tells them three parables to make his point. The story of the *lost sheep*, where the shepherd leaves his 99 sheep to look for the one lost one.

And he tells the story of the women with a *lost coin*, she still has 9 silver coins, but she lights a lamp, and searches until she finds her lost coin.

And then our story. The story of the *lost son*. Or better, the *lost sons*. Three stories about things lost and found.

You know the story. The impetuous demanding younger son demands his inheritance. Right now. He then proceeds to squander it all and realizes that he'd be better off back home as a servant in his father's house. So off he goes.

And then comes one of my favorite lines in all of scripture. . .

“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”

The father is watching and waiting. And note this: the father has no idea why the son is returning! Is he there to  
pick up some things he forgot?  
Visit some old friends?  
Extract more money from his old man?

The father doesn't care. He welcomes his lost son with open arms.  
Happily, the son IS, in fact, repentant.

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

The father almost doesn't notice or care as he is instructing his slaves to fetch the best robe, a ring, and sandals, and to kill the fat calf and get ready to party. The squandering son has come from death to life, and my lost son is found.

And the big brother is bitter. How come he gets a party? He doesn't deserve it! He embarrassed the family with his demands for inheritance. I've worked hard; I deserve much more than what he does!

If the squandering son was lavish in his wasteful spending, the older bitter brother is lavish in his jealousy, disdain, and grievance.

Though if anyone has a right to be aggrieved and angry, it's the FATHER! The younger son

INSULTED him and the family tradition  
SOLD the FAMILY LAND, the very gift of God!  
And WASTED his inheritance!

If anyone were going to go on a revenge tour, it would be the father. . . How dare you embarrass me in front of the whole community! How dare you waste my money!

But just as the faithful father loved the squandering son, so too does he love the bitter older brother. “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.”

Come on, let’s celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ ”

The bitter brother’s concern is that there might be an unfair advantage for people who don’t deserve it. He’s resentful.

It’s reminiscent of the grievance and resentment in our culture today that are so widespread. The current presidential administration is quite prone to grievance, resentment, and revenge, and one of the ways it’s manifesting itself is in the anti-DEI sentiment that is becoming prevalent. The current presidential administration has been proudly proclaiming the end of DEI in very self-congratulatory ways. Government websites have been purged of pages about BIPOC groups and individuals like the all-black Tuskegee Airman and Jackie Robinson. However, protest was strong enough to cause Jackie’s page to be put back up.

And the wrong kind of people aren’t just having their web pages taken down. They are being grabbed on the street like the U of M student, who is legally in this country, snatched by ICE two days ago, for apparently writing an op-ed, and op-ed, which of course, should be protected by our 1st Amendment right to free speech.

Should I hang out with people different than me? Should I advocate for their safety and protection? Of course.

South African anti-apartheid activist Desmond Tutu’s words, echoing the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., gives a picture of the kingdom. he writes,

“God says to you, ‘I have a dream. 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 my children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God’s family, my family.’”

That’s the kingdom of God. That’s the end to which we work. And it’s hard work to do while we are experiencing the powerful taking advantage of the weak through “the

dismantling of our Constitutional order, detentions and disappearances, the bullying of allies, destabilizing of the global order, the grift, the cruelty, the incessant lies,” writes historical Kristin Kobez DuMez.

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The Father loves both the repentant son and the UNrepentant son. Yes, God acts first, and expects us to act as the faithful father.

The squandering son is the one who repents. The bitter older brother doesn't in our story. We hope that he does, and we hope he welcomes his brother.

And we hope that the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, repented too, and changed their way of thinking from marginalizing, condemning, and taking advantage of the lost, to going out of their way to SEEK the lost.

The parable ends with the implicit question: will the Pharisees and scribes join Jesus, join the faithful father, in welcoming and eating with sinners?

This is the kingdom vision. This is the vision of a shared humanity, where all are welcomed. We care for the lost, because God cares for the lost, and cares for us.

\* \* \*

While he was far off,

While *we* are far off, like the lost son

And maybe while *we* are the lost-sight-of what's-good older brother

God comes running toward us

With arms wide open

Ready with kisses, a ring and robe and sandals and a banquet.

Cue the angels. Kill the fat calf. Put on your dancing shoes.

Let the rejoicing begin.

God gathers in the lost sheep.

God picks up the lost coin.

God welcomes home lost children.

Thanks be to God. Amen.