

Lent 4C 2019, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32, March 31, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

I like tradition. I like order. I suppose that's one of the reasons I've remained a Lutheran. Our commitment to an orderly liturgy, an orderly church, keep me rooted in, well, good order. There are times, however, where tradition is just plain wrong. Today is a good example. Tradition calls the story we just heard the "Parable of the Prodigal Son." Say the title and even those with merely a passing acquaintance with the Bible will know what you are talking about. But the title is only by tradition. Nowhere does the Bible or Jesus call this story the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The problem is compounded by that word "prodigal." Again, a word that isn't found in the Bible. As a kid I'd hear this story in Sunday School and church and think the word prodigal meant something like "naughty" or "disobedient" because that's what the younger son was. He disobeyed his father by demanding his inheritance and then going off and recklessly spending it on a spree of wild living. It was only later, in seminary I hate to admit, that I discovered the word "prodigal" doesn't mean "naughty" but rather "recklessly extravagant." It was then the proverbial light bulb went off over my head. Who in the story is being recklessly extravagant? The father, of course! His son insults him by demanding his inheritance before the old man is even dead. Instead of giving him a good beating as he would have deserved the father recklessly divides his property and gives this extravagant gift to the younger son. When this foolish, selfish boy comes back on his knees the father again recklessly throws an extravagant homecoming party. To give this son a place in the fields working his fields would itself have been a moment of grace. For the father to give even that would have been far more than the son deserved. But instead he throws a wild and wonderful party, welcoming the son back into full status. This isn't really the story of a wayward and selfish son who finally comes to his senses. It's a story about a recklessly extravagant and loving father whose never stops loving his son, even when that son seems to stop loving his father. So, rather than calling it the parable of the Prodigal Son I think a better title might be The Prodigal Father.

But, Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons." Oh, that's right. There's a second son. The elder son. The first-born son. He works hard and is utterly responsible. There's nothing recklessly extravagant about him. He sees how his younger brother contemptuously demands his share of the inheritance. And he also sees how his father foolishly gives in to his demand. Which means the older son is now going to have to work all that much harder to keep the farm, now just one-half its size because the other half was given to the other son. By dividing the farm the father puts their future at risk. The older son now must work twice as

hard. And to see the father act in such a reckless way; killing the best calf, giving the younger son the best robe and gold rings for his fingers, is just too much for the eldest son to bear. You can hear the resentment and seething anger in his voice. He can't even call him his father. He literally spits out the words. "Listen to me. I've been a slave to you, I've always obeyed you and you've never given me anything. But this son of yours..." He can't even call him his brother. His brother is dead to him.

It's hard to admit but I get this guy. I get his anger. I understand his resentment. Because he only wants what is fair. You see, he is a counter. He counts and maintains the list of rights and wrongs. In his heart he keeps a score. Good things to the positive, bad things to the negative. Yesterday my brother helped gather in the olive harvest, plus five. Today he sat around while we repaired the ox cart, minus ten. And when his brother demanded the inheritance and disowned the family, that was big fat minus a million. There's no way he could ever do enough to erase that negative. Which is why the elder son is angry not with his younger brother, but with his father. For his father's actions are saying, "your list is irrelevant. Keeping score is not the way I operate. Love is not an accountant's balance sheet." That's what so insults and infuriates the eldest son. It's not that the father is so extravagant. It's that his father is so reckless. And while the father assures the eldest son that he has always had his love, that he never stopped loving him, the parable concludes with the father declaring the heart of the matter. "But we **had** to celebrate and rejoice." Genuine love always erupts in necessary celebration and rejoicing when the impossible happens. Indeed, it's love itself that makes the impossible happen. Love welcomes home those who were lost. Love sees beyond the power of death and brings back to life that which was dead. Love doesn't keep score, or make a list of rights and wrongs. Love celebrates and doesn't keep count.

In the end we don't know how the eldest son responds to this declaration of his father's love. Does it change him? Is he able to accept his younger brother back? Is he able to accept his father's love for himself? Does he tear up his list of rights and wrongs and start living a life of extravagant and reckless love himself? We don't really know, and I suppose that's the point.

For in the end this parable is really about God and the extravagant and reckless love he shows for all of us, whether it's the younger, impetuous, foolish son or the elder, careful, calculating older son. All are loved by a God who recklessly and extravagantly takes on all the hurt and resentment and pain and suffering that the world can give and continue to love. We are fast approaching again that story of reckless love called Good Friday and the cross. It's a reckless love because God takes an enormous risk on our behalf by dying on that cross. What will be the outcome? Will the death of Jesus be just one more senseless and

violent killing of someone weak and powerless by the oppressive and the strong? Will those for whom he died come to see this as the ultimate act of love and cause for rejoicing and celebration? Will those he calls his own kill the fatted calf when those who don't deserve it return to the fold? Or will they continue to keep score and seethe in resentment?

The only love worth anything is love that is extravagant and reckless and willing to take a risk. That's how the father loves both his sons. That's how God loves you and me. And for me the title of this parable will always be The Recklessly and Extravagantly Loving Father. Amen.