



# CRUSADER LUTHERAN CHURCH

God's Vision Our Mission

## The Prodigal Son Revisited: Who's Really The Star of This Story?

Sermon for **March 14, 2010**— The Fourth Sunday in Lent

**Pastor Sandra Cox Shaw**

*God reveals that it is He — like the father in the cherished parable — who is truly extravagant and lavish ... with love, grace and forgiveness.*

**Scriptural Reference:** Luke 15:11-24

I often wonder, when I watch the Academy Awards, just how the people who decide such things, decide if someone should be nominated as Best Supporting Actor or Best Actor. How do they decide which character in a story is the lead actor and which character only plays a supporting role? I don't go to the movies much and usually have seen few of the nominated performances. This year, of the nominees, I only saw *An Education*. And, yes, I am one of the few in America who have yet to see *Avatar*.

If today's parable were a Hollywood film, I suppose it would be called *The Prodigal Son*. That's the name we've all used to name the story since we were in Vacation Bible School. But, is the son **really** the lead character of the story?

First, let's look at the word "prodigal" – not a word we use on a regular basis in our lives. I always just presumed it meant "delinquent" or "bad apple" or "ne'er do well." Well, actually it means extravagant, lavish, unrestrained and copious. Certainly that is how the son spent his inheritance: He spent lavishly and extravagantly on his own needs and his own wants ... until the money ran out. Then he had no resources to be extravagant with – on himself or anyone else.

So, we are told that he "came to himself." I guess his spendthrift ways were a form of temporary insanity. He comes to himself and realizes that he would have a better life as a servant in his father's house – and he probably practices his speech over and



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over until he has it just right, and then heads back home not knowing how he will be received.

Here's where the story gets good. Were this a movie, the film score would be rising to a crescendo. How will the father welcome him home? There is tension in the story line. Will the father give this younger son a job on the farm?

The younger son has treated his father as if he were dead. That's what it meant in those days to get your inheritance early and leave the farm for the big city. It means you are giving up on home and family, and that to you those people are dead and buried.

After the son left with his inheritance, did the father look upon him as dead? Remove the pictures of him from the mantle? Erase his name from the family genealogy, and forget all about him?

We see that is not at all what the father does. He sees the son while "he was still far off." Could that mean that he was looking for him to come down the road back to the farm? And he does not wait on the front porch for the son to get closer.

No, he behaves in a very undignified way, especially for wealthy men of Jesus' day: He jumps from the porch, runs down the road to meet his long lost, presumed dead son; he throws his arms around him, kisses him and orders the servants to dress him in a fine robe, sandals and a ring with the family crest, and then to prepare the most lavish banquet they can for the celebration of his homecoming.

Now, at this point of the story, who is the prodigal? Who is being lavish and generous and extravagant?

Were this a movie, should it be called the *Prodigal Son* or the *Prodigal Father*? Remember, "prodigal" means lavish and extravagant. The father is the lead in the story. Even when off stage he is a motivator for all that happens. The son is more a supporting actor than the lead of the story.

Christ told this story in response to the criticism of the Pharisees and the scribes. They were the religious elite of the day. They are shocked and insulted that a rabbi (for to them that is all he is, an itinerant rabbi) even though he is really a "nobody," he is a rabbi and he should have some decorum. He teaches tax collectors and sinners – and not only that, he welcomes them to his table and eats meals with them! This is an

outrage. This is not respectful.

So Jesus tells the story. Lloyd John Ogilvie, former chaplain to the U.S. Senate, wrote a book about the parables of Jesus that he entitled *Autobiography of God*. Because, according to Ogilvie, whenever Jesus goes into the storytelling mode of parables, he does so to teach the hearers about the true nature of God.

**God is the prodigal one. He is extravagant with love and grace and forgiveness.** He has no limits to the love he will pour out. And God doesn't have to be frugal with love and forgiveness, because there is always enough for everyone.

Earlier parables in Luke had compared God to the woman who hunted and hunted for the one missing coin, and to the shepherd who searched and searched for the one missing sheep out of the hundred that he tended.

**God never gives up on the children of God that are lost.** God waits and looks for us when we have forgotten who we are and when we come to our senses – when we come to ourselves and see how far we have wandered from the household of God, God is there waiting to welcome us home as if we had never left. Our sins are not just forgiven, they are forgotten.

We walk up the long dusty driveway back to God with our heads hung low, ashamed of the mess we have made of our lives, ashamed of the gifts from God that we have squandered ... and there God is on the front porch, running down the road to embrace and kiss us and celebrate our return home.

Now if that isn't amazing grace that gets you excited, puts a smile on your face and even moves you to maybe whisper an "Amen" – then I don't know what other Good News I can tell you!

**W**e who think we have not sinned, that we have not separated ourselves from God or have anything to be sorry for or ashamed of are like the elder brother and like the scribes and the Pharisees. Self righteous. Sure of our



**Return of the Prodigal Son**  
Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn  
c. 1669  
oil on canvas

own good works. Believing that good works and following the rules is the same as being in a relationship. How mixed up and confused we can get about what God values and what God is like.

Yes, following the rules is a good thing. Rules are in place to protect us. But following all the rules is not the same as having a loving relationship with God. God doesn't just want us to be "good" – God wants us to come home. To visit. To celebrate the resurrection of those who once were dead but now are alive.

Few (if any) of us are as righteous and good as the scribes, Pharisees and older son *think* they are. We may not commit adultery or murder ... but do we gossip? Do we secretly hate those we do not understand? Do we fill our homes with things while others in the world do without the basics of life? If we do an honest inventory ... are there any of us who do not need to come back to God with shame in our hearts asking for forgiveness?

**Jesus warns us about that self-satisfied kind of righteous attitude.** He warns us that thinking we have no sins and no need for God's forgiveness and mercy isolates us from the table, just as the Pharisees isolated themselves from the table Jesus prepared for the sinner. Just as the older brother isolated himself from the celebration.

This Lent – and indeed, every day of our lives – let's plan to take an honest moral inventory. Let's work to recognize all the ways that we have failed to be faithful children of God. Let's turn around and start walking towards home. God is there waiting to welcome us ... to celebrate our return ... to clothe us in forgiveness ... and to feed us with heavenly food. Amen.