

This won't surprise you... but I don't have enough time to say and do all that I want this sermon to say and do. And, in a word, that's really what this sermon is about... enough...

We don't think enough about enough. What is "enough" work? "Enough" rest? "Enough" celebration? "Enough" lamentation? How do we determine that we have "enough" on our plates? What's enough evidence for us to draw our conclusions, to leap to faith? When will we have had enough of complacency for injustice? When will our bank accounts have enough money... or our kids have enough commitments?

If you've had enough of these questions, just take this away from today: we haven't thought enough about having enough... and we don't have enough time.

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Abundance – the theme for this summer's worship – is all about having "more than enough." The opposite of abundance is "scarcity" – "not enough." One of our biggest challenges is our propensity to misidentify abundance and scarcity... erroneously thinking that which is abundant is scarce and that we'll have more than enough of that which is scarce. What is "hoarding" if not a confusion of abundance for scarcity? What is pollution if not the confusion of scarcity for abundance? The earth produces enough... and yet we can only live here.

That's why we picked today's passage from Luke 15. It's all about having abundance in the midst of scarcity... scarcity in the midst of abundance... it's about full tables, empty stomachs, and identifying what's enough... and what is wasteful... what is prodigal.

That's what prodigal means, after all - "wasteful." This parable has long been titled "The Prodigal Son," and at first glance it's understandable why this moniker got attached. Part of the story is about a young son who wastes everything – relationships, resources, opportunities, time... but he's not the only one in the story that might be perceived as wasteful. Let's dive in and I'll show you what might be there... if we have enough time.

First off, those of you who now know me, know how giddy and geeked out I can get about Bible stories... I've never encountered a Bible story that didn't have more to it than I thought going in... they are abundant to me... and today's story is no exception. The deeper we dive into the text and its 1<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean context... the more beautiful and challenging the story becomes! Take a look! By the way, for this sermon I'm indebted to the work of Kenneth E. Bailey's work on Ancient Near Eastern culture, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, and especially his book on today's passage, *The Cross and the Prodigal*.

The author, Luke, sets the story up in the first verses of chapter 15. Jesus' group of followers is growing, but it's growing as more and more discredited, disreputable, and disdainful people gravitate to Jesus' messages. Without wasting time on the particulars – "Tax Collectors and Sinners" is a succinct way of denoting the full spectrum of the worst of the worst. Both categories are traitors – betrayers of people and God. In the same way, "Pharisees and Scribes" – the people who grumble about the riff-raff with which Jesus surrounds himself – are a succinct way of describing the recognizably holy and credentialed. The Bible doctoral candidates say about the basket of deplorables, "This fellow" which is the Greek equivalent of the mockingly dismissive statement, "This guy... welcomes sinners and eats with them." This guy joins himself with them.

Luke tells us... "So he told them THIS parable..." as if Jesus then tells a single parable... but if you're following along in Luke 15, you'll notice that Luke then includes what seem to be 3 parables: about 1 lost sheep out of 100; 1 lost coin out of 10; and 1 lost brother out of 2 – and, of course, the one that "found them."

IS it ONE parable? Is it 3 parables? It all culminates in this morning's passage... about a wealthy family and the abundantly shocking behavior they engage in. In the end, I'm not sure WHO is more prodigal – wasteful - or even if anyone deserves that label. (Prepare yourself... you're about to get an abundance of information – don't let it go to waste.)

A man had two sons. The younger said to him... “dad, I wish you would hurry up and die.” That’s the ancient meaning behind demanding his share of the property. It’s unbelievably offensive to a 1<sup>st</sup> century father. The father would be well within his rights to not only blatantly refuse and cut him out all together, but he could even flog such a disobedient child – even an adult child. BUT... unbelievably... the father divides the property between the two.

The younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country. Unbelievable! First off, this isn’t like moving some money between bank accounts... there’s little liquid capital in ancient Israel/Palestine. When the father divided the property between his sons, he literally divided the property. He divided land, livestock, servants... physical assets, not cash. The younger son... in the span of a few days, sold off everything, took the cash and ran. Unbelievable! It’s not just the offense of demanding the property, but to turn around and immediately liquidate it!? That was great-great-grandfather’s fruit tree... grandfather’s field... that’s where he spent long days battling the harsh climate to feed us and build up enough for us... and woosh... in a few days... gone.

How embarrassing for this father! You might think he’d be the laughing stock of the village – and perhaps some people derided him behind closed doors – but the odds are the ancient villagers would be just as offended. This is an affront to the entire community. This boy is mocking and insulting everything they stand for... the boy might have to get out of town quick... the townspeople might rather see him beaten than live out his mockery in their town.

So the son goes off to a distant country... another way of saying a sinful land. There he squandered... he wasted... what he had weezled away from the family in prodigal living. Woosh... gone. After having spent everything a severe famine – the epitome of scarcity – hit that country. He went from an abundant life at home, to having enough, to wasting enough, to living in scarcity... he was in need. Believe me, this is one of the LEAST shocking parts of the story... isn’t that shocking!

He hired himself out to those who had taken his inheritance. These are the people who took advantage of him... he’d rather stay with them!? During a famine – when there’s already not enough!? Unbelievable! But it gets crazier. He’s feeding pigs! He’s a Jewish boy in gentile land, feeding pigs... the only thing that could make it worse is if he ate WITH the pigs. But wait... it’s even worse. He WANTED to eat with the pigs, but he wasn’t even able to do that! Are you shocked!? Jesus’ listeners would’ve been.

Luke tells us, the young son “came to himself” – literally he returned to his identity... he remembered who he was... who he came from. He said to himself, “my father is generous to his servants (unlike my master here) – they have abundance. I’m dying of hunger... I’ll go back home and say to him...” He recognizes abundance, scarcity, and what is enough.

And then Luke recounts the statement this young son practices and prepares to say to his father. “Father,” he recites, “I’ve sinned against you and God. I’m not worthy to be a son... treat me like your slave.” And off he went... back to his father. A father we’re only NOW really introduced to.

Up till this point, all we know is that the father was unbelievably generous, giving an inheritance to an undeserving and irresponsible child. The scribes and Pharisees listening to Jesus must be anticipating the response of a faithful, dignified Jewish father... here must come the righteous punishment the son deserves... being hired as a slave would be generous. How unbelievable it must be to hear what the father does – it is the opposite of dignified.

While the son was still far off, his father saw him... that means he was watching. This father was wasting his remaining days watching the horizon for his wayward son!? That fellow rejected, abandoned, and forgot about you... he’s dead to you (and sure enough, the father recognizes this later too). Where’s your dignity old man!? Stop looking for life amongst the dead.

This father has seen many people come over that horizon since his son passed over... and yet he hadn’t had enough of watching yet... and then... he sees him... in fact, he recognizes ... he knows it’s him... while he’s still far away. He is moved by his guts into action... that’s the meaning of the Greek word *splanghne* – moved by one’s guts into action –

that's compassion. Overcome with spalangthe – the father does one of the most outrageous, ludicrously acts an old man can do in the ancient world... he runs.

Old men... fathers... do. not. run. Running reflects a scarcity of self-control and dignity. It's shameful. On top of all that... the ancient Judeans and Galileans didn't wear pants – they had not been invented yet. Old men wore long robes to their ankles, likely sashed around the waste. They made running nearly impossible... unless... unless one hiked the robe up beyond the knees. Imagine! This old father, robe hiked up beyond the knees... running... they didn't wear boxers or briefs you know... an old man running is the height of indignity. Embarrassing. Unbelievable... disgusting... a complete disregard for one's honor...

**BUT... he does more than run...**

He embraces the son and kisses him (literally he "falls upon his neck") – the signs of forgiveness in their ancient context. In those two short – unbelievably... abundantly gracious acts... the issue is over. If someone you wronged embraces and kisses you they have absolved you. Whatever disagreements and wrongs existed between you are released. It's quick too. The son can't even recite his speech... he starts it, but the father is already planning the party. "Bring the robe..." he commands, "the best one. Give him the ring that signifies he's part of our family again (after all, he couldn't liquidate that – it can only go on the finger of family members)... forget the famine – ignore the perceived scarcity... kill the fattened calf (the one the father has likely been fattening in anticipation of this day)." Let's celebrate!

This son of mine was dead and is alive again... he was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate.

Unbelievably... after ALL that... this father wants to party!

The parable could end there couldn't it? Something lost being found... that's the premise of the lost sheep and lost coin parts of this parable... and those segments ended in celebration... just like the one the father advocates... but Jesus isn't done yet.

There's an elder son, out in the fields – like a dignified boy. He hears the celebration and asks one of the slaves what's happening. To his disgust, the prodigal is back, the fattened calf is cooked, the father is throwing a party... and he refused to go... now, we might sympathize, but Jesus' listeners would be mortified! That's unbelievable that a son wouldn't be in attendance at his father's celebration. The eldest son would have hosting duties to perform. For him to refuse would be a massive insult to his father – the whole community would notice his absence! What a tragedy – this father has TWO embarrassing children!

Unbelievably, the father goes OUT to the eldest son. That would never happen either. Children come to fathers... fathers don't go out to children! This father even undignifies himself by PLEADING with his eldest boy. Ancient fathers don't plead with their children, they command. And they certainly don't entertain the kind of talk back this eldest son gives:

"I've been your slave. I've never disobeyed you. You've never thrown me a party!"

Listen to this father, "Son, you're always with me... all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours (he's more than simply a father's son... he's a brother) was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found..."

Would we go into the party? How are we going to react when contemporary fundamentalist evangelicalism disintegrates? Will we be watching the horizon for them? Will we party when they come through our doors? They'll be coming.

That's the question laid at the feet of the Pharisees, scribes, PhD candidates, and any of us who have our baskets of deplorables we can't imagine Jesus eating with and celebrating over. Would we party with them? How do we respond to

a father with such abundance? Do we call it a waste? Do we live in fear of a scarcity? The parable doesn't end... it just stops.

Who's the prodigal in this story? The younger son who wastes the inheritance and relationship? Sure. The older son, who wastes the relationship and time? Sure. Perhaps you've heard this described as the parable of the Prodigal SONS... or the lost SONS... I'm particularly drawn to calling this the parable of the prodigal father. He's wasteful... absolutely.

What is he wasteful with you may ask? He's not wasteful with compassion, forgiveness, love, resources... he seems to have those in abundance - more than enough, and as long as there's more than enough you can't waste it... we'd only think it's a waste if we misidentify abundance for scarcity.

SO... what is he wasteful with? Dignity... honor... respect. The father is prodigal with dignity. He waits, he watches, he recognizes, he embraces, he kisses, he parties, he goes out, he pleads, he listens, he responds... he wastes dignity. He lives as if he has an abundance of dignity, and his listening community treats dignity as a scarcity. Who's right? I don't know...

BUT... I do know the father recognizes the discrepancy... and that's why he runs. I told you he does more than run... Luke tells us that the father "races." It's the difference between those simply in a hurry... they run, and those in a competition... they race. This father RACES.

Who is he racing? His son? Sure, what if he changes his mind? What if he is too embarrassed? The father races his son... he has to get to him before he loses himself again. But, I also think this father must race the village. Remember, this boy insulted them too. He betrayed and embarrassed them too. What if they see him before I do!? What if they get to him before I do!? They'll kill him!

Can't you just imagine it... an old man... he's been in the starting blocks ever since his boy left... ready... set... waiting on the signal to go... ready to outrun his competition – no matter the indignity... prodigal...

And then, in an instant... woosh... the race is on. Are our shoes tied?

How fast is the father? Fast enough. Faster than us. THIS father races... prodigally. The parable of the prodigal father.

Had enough yet?

We need to think more about determining what's "enough" for us. We won't understand abundance until we contemplate what is enough. Work... rest... celebration... lamentation... the dignities and opportunities with which we're willing to be prodigal in order to have access to the abundance offered by an undignified father that invites us to associate with people we'd rather not.

We're going to be invited to join parties for bigots, homophobes, racists, far-winged fundamentalists... will we be prodigal with the invitation?

We're going to have to come to grips with the reality that our father doesn't think there are enough people in the party until EVERYONE is in it. God loves people enough, God never has enough of them.

This father greets ANYone – tax-collectors, sinners... daughters and sons... Fords and Trumps... molesters and soldiers... PhDs and Pharisees... – ANYone who asks "Is this heaven?" the God we know greets with the beautiful compassionate response, "... now that you're here, it is."

On your marks... get set...