

Lent 4, Prayers, Sunday, March 27, 2022

PLEASE NOTE : Friends, my journey as the pastor of the dear Plains flock nears its conclusion even as all Covid restrictions are ending.

We are very grateful to God that worship services and meetings have resumed at the church. For the past two years, Prayers, Scriptures, and Sermons have been mailed to you weekly so to keep you spiritually fed and connected to your church home at the Plains.

I want to let you know that Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022 will be the last mailing of these worship materials.

If you are able, we sincerely hope that you will join us for Sunday worship at the church. If that is not likely, know that you will continue to receive the monthly Plains Facts

Newsletter. You are special and loved by God, me, and your church family. May the good Lord bless and keep you! --Pastor Margie Bell

Congregational Concerns

Fraser (in Poland helping refugees escape Ukraine) the people of Ukraine, Michelle (*Carol C.*) Lucas, Silcox family, Sharon Axford, Shirley Griffin, Cherie Doyon, Larry Seabrook, Evelyn Crafts granddaughter Brittany, Rona's mother Vi, Jenny & family, Randy Greer, Tiff and family, Don & the family of the late Penny Sawyer, Cathy Tredenick, Karl Crocker, Linda Hepburn, Marissa Dale's Aunt, Lori Ann

Morning Prayer

The words of Psalm 92 bracket our prayers:

*It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night.*

*You have made us glad by your work;
at the works of your hands, we sing for joy.*

Loving God, we offer thanks for all that you have given us: for the measure of healing and normalcy we are receiving as the pandemic eases its grip---

the healing for illnesses, sad losses and weariness of spirit. Thank you for being our rock and a place of shelter in the storms of life. Thank you for loving family, good friends, helpful neighbors, and church family whose presence, support and prayers sustain and bless us. We hope that they have sensed the same support from us.

We give thanks for the measure of freedom that we enjoy in this nation; and for the responsibilities we have to promote freedom for others who live within and beyond these borders. We pray for Ukrainians as they fight and die for freedom to be their own nation. We pray for their leaders and those who are taking part in negotiations to find a path to peace while finding routes for evacuees to escape danger. We pray for the citizens are stuck in the destroyed city of Mariupol and other devastated cities. We pray for the volunteers who are helping people at the borders of NATO neighbors. May they find strength in their righteous cause and support from the countries that open their arms to receive desperate refugees. We pray for those who seek shelter in Canada, that they will receive a warm welcome and resources to help them on the road to healing.

Thank you, God for our church and for the community which surrounds us, here. We lift up to you those named for prayer. God, you know their needs. You hear their prayers. You bend over them as they sigh in sorrow or discomfort. In their time of weakness, give your strength. In their hour of doubting, give faith and hope. In their night of loneliness, send your Spirit dove. We think of the needs in St. Thomas and other places for affordable living spaces and mental health support. Grateful for all that we have, we know that many lack what they need. Help us to share our resources so that needs can be met and those feeling lost or forgotten will be welcomed and found. We pray for the Deacons, Search Committee and leaders of the church as we enter a time of pastoral change. Guide us O Thou Great Jehovah, as you have always done. May we sense your presence with us, leading, comforting, encouraging as we move forward into this next season of service.

As the psalmist prayed, so do we:

*It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night.
You have made us glad by your work; at the works of your hands,
we sing for joy. Amen*

Gospel Luke 15: 1-2; 11b-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. ²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have

been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Sermon: JUST DESERTS

The parable of the Prodigal son is one of the best known of Jesus’ parables. The reason for this, I expect, is because any and every generation of humans can relate to the family dynamics in this story. If you ever identified as the black sheep, or the self-absorbed teenager whose parents never understood you--- then maybe you identify with the younger brother. Or, maybe you were the older child appointed to supervise the younger ones. Did you sometimes resent having that responsibility? Did you fume when the younger kids got away with more than you were allowed when you were that age—Maybe then your sympathies are with the older brother. But if you’ve known both the agony and ecstasy of being a parent or guardian and seeing the children you’ve created or chosen make wrong choices or take the bumpiest roads--- then maybe your heart aches like the father in the story. If you ever lost sight of a loved one for a short time or for a long, long time---then maybe your heart breaks like the father. But then life, being what it is, may mean that at various times you have behaved in a way similar to each one of these characters--- which is probably why this parable remains current and REAL.

But what makes parables, like Jesus’ parables not just known but powerful, are the meanings that live beneath the surface. Parables pull us into them and grab our hearts and turn our expectations upside down. Parables seldom end as we expect which tell us that the potential for discovering meaning in them are multifaceted, and limitless. As we set out to ponder the parable of the father and his children, we encounter a couple of road blocks that work against the perception that there are more truths to discover than we’ve already found. One road block is that the story is so familiar to us. We know how the story goes, so we don’t pay close attention. As adults we do the opposite of children who memorize their story books and when adults try to skip over a page or paragraph, children rebel, demanding a redo, or they fill in the blanks themselves. Then the day comes when the grown -up child knows what comes next and quickly skips past it. like her parent did to her. After familiarity with the story line, the second road block is the title of the Parable. Titles are important. They are meant to draw attention, to help readers or watchers focus upon a main theme. Our pew Bibles title it as the Parable of the Prodigal and his Brother. Others title it as The Prodigal Son. These titles tell us to pay attention to the two brothers. But did Jesus mean for *them* to become the chief focus for this audience? And no where in the story does Jesus refer to anybody as a prodigal.

Who or what is a prodigal? Perhaps, you’ve come to understand prodigal to describe the young man’s decision to repent of his debauched lifestyle and return home to his father. But the word ‘prodigal’ does not mean wayward or repentant. Prodigal means “wasteful, over-the-top extravagance.” Certainly the word ‘prodigal’ describes the activity of the younger brother once he got out on this own and then went out on the town. “He squandered his property in dissolute living,” says Jesus. He blew his wad, and ended up

eating the pigs pods. Wasting precious resources on wine, women and song was prodigal. However, acting prodigally seems to have been an inherited trait. If anyone in this story is wastefully extravagant, and over the top in giving away money and resources, isn't the father most guilty? While the junior member in the family was definitely self-absorbed and wasteful, isn't that more or less normal for many young people? But how about their Dad? On at least four occasions in the span of this story, it appears that the father totally ignores the social conventions of the day and behaves in a decidedly prodigal way. First, when junior lands at his office door and demands his inheritance, good old dad gives in and provides it to him. Was dad insulted or terribly hurt that junior couldn't wait until his death to get his share? We're not told that he was. But if he was, he swallowed his hurt, sold off a third of his acreage to a neighbor and presented a sizeable wad of cash over to his youngest. Thinking that he had hit the jackpot, the youngster packed his bags, jumped on his donkey and pursued his adventures in a far away big city. We don't know how long it took for that lad to squander, that is, to prodigalize his wealth. What we do know, is that every day that he was gone, his father anxiously watched the road, longing, hoping, praying for his son's return.

Then one morning, after he spent months, or years gazing down the road, the father caught sight of a dark figure against the pale pink gold of the horizon. His heart leapt in his chest, and even though his child was too far away to be identified dad knew, he *knew* that his boy was home. And defying social conventions again, for it was seen to be undignified for an elder to be seen running down a public road he hiked up his skirts anyway, and he ran! He ran and ran and ran until he could not run any further. He staggered to a stop to catch his breath as his son approached. Then as the lad opened his mouth to give his well-rehearsed speech about not deserving to be his son, his skinny, dehydrated frame became engulfed in the massive folds of his father's cloak. His face streaked with dust and despair was bathed by tears – the tears of his dad, sobbing out his relief and joy.

The third social convention that the father disregarded was to throw a huge welcome home party for his disgraced son. News had gotten around the community about the younger man's misbehavior and disregard of his father's dignity and property. The townsfolk were ready and able to dispense some pretty ugly punishment if the patriarch of the family gave the word to react harshly against him. But instead, the only word the community received was a party invite. They were to come and celebrate the return, not of a black sheep, but a lost sheep—'for the son who was dead is alive, he was lost and now is found!'

The final social convention that the father ignored was when he left the party that he was hosting for his guests. He walked out from the building and went out into the field that lay behind the outbuildings. He searched, with his lantern held above his head, for his eldest son, who had not yet made an appearance at the party. Dad could have just ordered his first-born to grow up and return to the house. After all the eldest was dishonoring their guests by refusing to show them hospitality. But the Father didn't try either of these methods. Instead, the father shared the same kind of extravagant, wasteful love towards his first born. He was prodigal in the way he risked insulting his guests by leaving them to their own devices as he left them to seek out his eldest son. He was prodigal in the way he stayed to listen to the young man's complaints which were directed at this fathering decisions. Admittedly we would say, the elder brother's gripes were understandable....

“I’ve been a good son but you never gave me a party! I’ve stayed home like I should have while this son of yours threw your money away on wine, women and song. And then he’s treated like he’s a returning hero!”

Did the older brother have a point? Sure. The younger brother was not getting his big brother or the neighbors believed was his just deserts. “Just deserts” is an old-fashioned phrase that means getting the punishment or outcome you deserve. The Old Testament’s version of “just deserts” is that law that says, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” So the *just deserts* of Jesus’ day allowed for one’s neighbors to beat up anyone who brought a bad name or disgrace to their family and community. Or just deserts for the youngest brother might have been ordering servants to throw him off the property. Or, best case scenario-- at least as the prodigal brat imagined it, his Dad would agree to keeping him on as one of his servants. To the sulking big brother, any one of these expressions of giving his wayward brother his just deserts was preferable to throwing the jerk a party!

Meanwhile, as the elder boy griped and swore, and cried, his father listened.

And then, true to character this self-less, loving- at- all- costs parent replied to his entitled son: “My son, all that I have, *all* that I have, is yours.” But we *had* to celebrate and rejoice because *your* brother who was dead to us is alive. *Your* brother who was lost, has been found!” WOW! Such indulgent, wasteful, over the top love. A prodigal love.

Like parables often do, this one remains open ended. We do not learn if the elder brother chose to return to the house or whether he stayed in the barn. We don’t know if he ever found the grace to forgive his brother. We don’t know if the younger man stayed home to help manage the farm. The only character in this story that could be trusted to remain consistently loving and prodigal in his grace and forgiveness was their father.

We remember that Jesus told this parable in the context of the religious elite who complaining and criticized Jesus’ for welcoming sinners and eating with them. If the Father in the parable represented God, and the young rebel represented sinners, and the elder son represented the religious elite, then the parable’s meaning was clear: God loves all his children desperately and beyond belief and will do *anything, anything* to bring them home to God’s loving heart. God even went as far as sending Jesus, his one and only begotten Son to seek and save the lost.

Sometimes the lost are the ones who think they are not lost. Today, in some houses of worship there are Christians who say that their way to read the Bible is the right way and those who read it differently have lost their way. There are some Christians who believe that welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ+ folks is what Jesus would do while others argue that only if they repent their *sin* shall they be accepted into their flock. There are some Christians who are convinced that there is no way that God would lavish the same favor on Jewish believers, or Muslim or Hindu believers than God has upon us, the devotees of Jesus!

There are some Christians on the political left who despise some Christians on the political right and vice versa. There are some Christians who silently hope that immigrants who look or speak or worship differently will not move into *their* neighborhoods. There are some Christian Canadians who look at their fellow citizens behavior through this Covid crisis and hope they get their ‘just deserts.’

And then there is the behavior of our God. The one and only God. The God who created *all*, who loves *all*, who desires to welcome and forgive all despite our selfishness, despite our self righteousness, despite our inability to welcome and forgive our sisters and brothers.

Instead of giving humanity our just deserts, God gives us more—more than we deserve or can imagine —

God gives us prodigal love, abundant grace, and a second chance every day, to grow into the child that God calls and claims us to be. What a risk God takes on humans! God endlessly risks a broken heart in the hopes that *some* day, *one* day, we'll all come to our senses---- and come home. Amen