

I'm a word person. I really like words. I listen to "A Way with Words" on NPR. I learn new words on purpose. I love to write and read. It's just who I am. In school... in 4<sup>th</sup> grade... when it was time for reading and we'd get in a small group to read a chapter book out loud... that was my favorite time of the day, 'cuz I could read out loud really well. For me, math on the other hand ... not my favorite.

So when I read and began to study and pray about this scripture lesson for today, I found myself getting interested in one word that I thought I knew, but when I looked it up, turned out I didn't.

That's the word prodigal. If you're NOT SURE what it means, as you're sitting there right now, think in your mind to yourself what you guess it means. I was thinking that it meant wayward or lost or maybe even one who returns, especially when the title in my Bible for this passage was "The Lost Son".

But it doesn't. It means lavish, abundant, extravagant. But it means more than that. It means over-the-top extravagant or lavish. So much that it could be considered wasteful, which makes sense, because the younger son in this parable certainly was extravagantly wasteful with his inheritance. But I got to thinking. He wasn't the ONLY one in this story that was prodigal.

A reminder here, that at St. Paul's we are currently in a sermon series called "Story-Formed: Parables of Grace". This is the 6<sup>th</sup> of 7 parts. All of the parables were chosen help us understand God's amazing grace. That sweet love of God that is free, unearned, unmerited and available to all who choose to receive it. Salvation by grace, through faith.

You know, of course, that a parable is a story, a narrative used to illustrate an idea. Many of the parables found in the Bible are allegories, which this one is too – an allegory meaning it has a deeper meaning that what we hear on the surface.

I know, many of you have probably read or heard this story numerous times, but I believe, it's likely you'll get something new out of it today and it could even be important enough to change your life. God is in the business of changing lives.

A changed life. That's one of the main themes in this parable. The younger of two sons takes his share of the inheritance, which by law would have been only have been half of what his older brother was to receive, takes everything he owns, evidently not ever intending to return and goes as far away from his father and his home as he can.

He's reckless with his money. Prodigal. We don't know what exactly he uses it all on, it doesn't specifically say in verse 13. But we don't need details do we? Our imagination can easily fill in the gaps of what we'd probably do if we lived without moral restraint, which is what is hinted at here. And it's really interesting that his older brother quickly fills in this gap later in verse 30 stating his younger brother "devoured his father's property with prostitutes", which, there is no way the older brother could have known that, because he didn't even realize the young brother had returned, much less talked to him about what happened while he was gone. Seems like maybe he was filling in the gaps from his own thinking.

So the younger brother basically wastes all his resources and has to take a job caring for pigs - the most unclean and lowest of creatures by Jewish law. He's scraping the barrel. He's even yearning to eat the husks the pigs leave behind, because he's so hungry.

But in verse 17 there is a shift, a real change. It's a short and somewhat lost phrase in this long story...but pivotal.

This is the important moment. He realizes, becomes self-aware, of who he is and what he's done.... And that he needs help. In some circles that's called "hitting rock bottom".

It's said that everyone has a different rock bottom that can change the direction of one's life and thinking. I'd say for John Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist Church, it was three things in succession – in 1735, he sailed across the sea for four months to be a missionary in Savannah, Georgia. On the journey a huge storm tossed the ship about and broke the mast. Everyone on board was afraid they would die, they were all crying and panicking – even Wesley - everyone except a small group of men from the Moravian Church who were calmly praying together. Then when Wesley made it to Savannah, he fell in love with a woman, but

was talked out of marrying her by a friend. The woman felt jilted and mistreated. Rumors about Wesley circulated and ruined his reputation. And finally, he failed to convert any of the native people of Savannah to Christ, which was his main goal. He returned to England in despair, miserable and seriously considered giving up ministry.

My rock bottom came the summer between my junior and senior year of college. I'd been accepted to an urban ministry program in St. Louis. Twelve other college students from around the world and I lived together in a converted convent. We worked in various Christian agencies around the city. In the middle of that 8 week experience, Darryl, a native American student in our group, was robbed, beaten and left unconscious in an alley one evening. We didn't know where he was all night. Thankfully he was ok in the end. Shortly after that, as I was putting gasoline in our van - it was my job to drive all of us to our jobs - a car sped by me, within inches of my hip, ripped my purse from my shoulder and skidded out of the station before I even realized what had happened. I had just gotten paid so all my money was gone, but worse yet, my address book I'd had for years - written out in those days - had not duplicate. And it also was gone. These two events, in quick succession, happening to us young students giving our all to serve Christ, rocked my faith and understanding of God.

Though it's not my belief that God initiates these rock bottom experiences, I do believe they can be a vehicle for knowing God better or coming to know God the first time and truly understanding what He has done for us in Jesus.

It was just this kind of experience that drove the younger son in our parable to claim in verse 18 and a few words before it (read 17-19 from Bible)

Obviously the younger son was at the end of his rope - had hit rock bottom - right? It's possible he literally was dying from starvation and when the father orders the robe to be put on him, it's possible that he was near naked and that was why he ordered it so quickly.

But let me ask you, when the younger son rehearses out loud his unworthiness to be considered a son, to instead take on the status of servant, might not that not have been even worse than starvation and

nakedness? Might that, then, have been his moment of salvation? To realize the magnitude not only of the resources he'd freely been given and squandered, but more importantly the magnitude of the relationship and love?

Starting at the the second sentence of verse 20 is my favorite part of this parable.  
(read from Bible - 20b-24.)

Now who's the prodigal?

The father who had been deserted, disrespected, unloved doesn't even wait for an apology, but reinstates everything and more than the younger son had been before - not only the best robe, but sandals, which were a sign of status, slaves did not wear shoes - and the ring - probably his signet ring - which gave him now even more authority than the older son.

Now who's the prodigal?

That day, when my purse was stolen, my life was changed. I had a rock-bottom conversation with God that night I can't take time to explain, but I believe God showed me the sunset and laughter of children as reminders of God's prodigal love. And the next day, a special delivery came in the mail. A big, many-colored new purse from one of the members of my home church who'd heard what happened. Prodigal love.

None of us deserve it, but God has for each of us that very same prodigal love for anyone who desires it. If you have heard this sermon and believe God is calling you to receive that love for the first time, or once again, through Jesus, I invite you to say this prayer silently, just between you and God:

Oh God I trust in your grace given to me... as you became flesh in Jesus... and experienced death so I can now be spiritually free. I need you. You are life. I accept the gift of your Holy Spirit living inside me that I might have life abundantly. And now help me go and give prodigal love to others. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.