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The Church that God had in Mind: “More Prodigal Than You Know”

Sermon by Matt Hook

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

Introduction:

Here it is: the Prodigal Son. Again! Not only have we heard it preached many times, we've exegeted it as a class! And we've listened to Amy Grant and Benny Hester and half of the other contemporary Christian singers sing about it at one time or another. For a long time I thought "prodigal" meant lost. I now know that it means "recklessly wasteful." How appropriate for us today.

Think of all the recklessly wasteful things happening in America:

- Recklessly, wastefully, we love things and use people. We're known around the world as the "throwaway society."
- Teenagers in the U.S. spend \$104 dollars per week on average. Talk about wasteful!
- Think of the Commercialization of Christmas: Leigh did something new: she went shopping the Friday after Thanksgiving, at 6am. She said the Walmart parking lot was jammed. At 6am! People were walking out of the store with 4 TVs (the limit). My good friend Pete Cuffe says of his wife Laurie (also my good friend) that "Laurie's saved me so much money, I'm going broke!"
- The American lifestyle is recklessly wasteful. Our materialism, our stripping of the environment, the reality of personal debt, the hours per day we spend watching those 4 TVs. The millions of dollars spent on the trash just so Americans can feed their "entertainment addiction."
- Entire industries are based on our insatiable lust to be recklessly wasteful.

And then think of recklessly wasteful things happening around the world:

- The recent bombings and war in Liberia. What a waste of energy and lives!
- The reckless wastefulness of Saddam Hussein, destroying lives and building lavish palaces.
- Suicide bombers – what a waste of lives.
- Terrorist activities.

What really gets me is not just the actual issues. It's all the good that could be done with all the time and energy consumed by bad choices. Reckless wastefulness may be the biggest problem on our planet.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son could be called “The Parable of the Recklessly Wasteful.”

- We are all so familiar with it, we tend to discount it.
- It is recklessly wasteful of God to give us such a great parable that we take for granted.
- A Candler seminary professor admits, "Is it just me, or has the Prodigal Son story become something of a bore lately?"
- "A man had two sons..." Stop there. You know the rest of the story. It's about the younger son who loses everything. "No matter how badly you've messed up life, pick yourself up and head for home. You'll be forgiven." You can almost hear the violins tuning up for the party when you hear the son say "Father give me my share of the inheritance..." That trivializes it and makes an Aesop's fable out of it. Some say it's about the older son who resents everybody and everything. God is the father and we tend to sin in one of two directions. "Are you an older, or a younger?" Yes, it's a beautiful

story. But let's see if we can recover some of the shock value. After all, it has been called the "Gospel within the Gospel."

- May we never again be recklessly wasteful with this beautiful parable of Jesus!

Jesus tells it in the midst of an uncomfortable situation: Jesus was receiving tax-collectors and sinners, thus freaking out the Pharisees and scribes. And they asked, "Why does Jesus fellowship with sinners?" Jesus tells three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, so people will see what God normally does.

- **In the mind of a first century Israelite, it begins dangerously.**
 - "A man had two sons..."
 - This sets up conflict immediately. Why only two? At that time it was most desirable to have as many sons as possible. It creates a we/they scenario, a haves versus the have-nots. It conjures up infamous history for the people there: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau. Not what you would call a nice family like the Munsters!

The Prodigal Son was recklessly wasteful with his inheritance.

- **His departure from home was recklessly wasteful in how he treated his father.**
 - In that culture, asking for your inheritance while the parent was still living was like saying "I wish you were dead." Shame!
 - Psychology of entitlement: Father, give me my share of the property...
 - How much do we directly offend God our heavenly father, acting like he owes us.
 - Why'd he want to leave?
 - Sometimes leaving home is the best thing we can do.
 - Home may be a stifling place: a place of conflict, contempt, or abuse; or it may be what holds a person back from being whole, or from achieving responsible adulthood.
 - Millions of people are forced to leave their homes: civil war, government, famine.
 - We know he was leaving for good. He took everything with him.

His life abroad was recklessly wasteful with his inheritance.

- Prodigal living – the recklessness of sin. He tried to satiate himself.
 - He tried it all. He had his cake and ate it too, but it bit back.
 - National Geographic aired a special one night about how eagles catch fish in lakes. They fly high above the water but their eyesight is so good they can spot fish in the water below. When they see one they fold their wings back and aim directly for the water, going as fast as 130mph. When they reach the water they spread their wings, reach out their talons, grab the fish, and begin flying back to shore.

On this TV special, they showed film of a very unusual occurrence. An eagle made a dive for a fish and grabbed it in its talons. But the fish was much larger than the eagle realized. As it began to fly to the shore you could see the strain in the eagle's flight. It was not going to make it to shore with this huge fish. It then tried to drop the fish, to let go of it. But the talons of the eagle had dug into the flesh of the fish so deeply that it could not pull them out. It struggled but to no avail.

Slowly the eagle descended into the lake and drowned, unable to let loose its catch.

Many times, like the Prodigal and like the eagle, we grab on to something that can be dangerous. We feel we have control and can stop holding on any time we like. It becomes a habit or a lifestyle. One day we try to get out or let go and discover that we no longer have a hold of it but it has a hold of us. Materialism. Addiction. Work. Selfishness. Attitudes. Sin. It only drags us down.
- Poverty and Pigs: The prodigal hit bottom – while starving, this good little Jewish boy fed pigs. Jesus had such a good sense of humor! But he also took sin very seriously. This was the lowest of all positions for an Israelite. And the young man took it! His reckless wastefulness had led him to a terrible end.

The return home of a recklessly wasteful son:

- I'm Wesleyan enough to think his return begins in the pigsty, with the memory of his father.
- **He had a revelation. He didn't come home because of anything he did.**
 - He "came to his senses." For years I tried to figure out what that meant. It could be the key to unlocking the secret of evangelism! In the Greek it means to see clearly, to repent, to realize what he had done. But that's not what brought him home. He didn't come home because of anything he did.

- What brought him home was the witness of what his father did for the lowest of the hired servants. They were well cared for. (They have more than enough to eat). He came back because of what his father had been doing all along. He came back because of what he had seen.
- What a testimony to the nature of the home that he left! He now saw old things in a new light.
- **He picked up and headed for home.**
 - His realization became resolve. His resolve became action. A ton of resolutions and vision is nothing compared to one single ounce of putting it into practice.
 - Carrying out your resolve is where the blessing is.
- **He would return as a servant.**
 - We often think we are not good enough to be loved.
 - Our experience with sin gives us a warped outlook on life and God.
 - We only see God in our own image. We can't imagine this kind of love.
 - He went from saying "Father GIVE me" to saying "Father MAKE me..."

Here is Jesus' shocker: While he was a long way off, his father saw him, and came running, seeing full-well all the results of recklessly wasteful living on his son.

- His father was a wealthy man. He had land and servants. He must have been well-respected.
- **His father saw him.** He saw the effects of the recklessly wasteful living on his son. He probably smelled the filth of the pigs, saw the rags, but it didn't phase him.
 - The prodigal may not have seen the father, but the father saw him.
 - The eyes of mercy are quicker than the eyes of repentance.
 - God sees the sinner long before the sinner sees him.
 - The Father sees with eyes of compassion, not with judgment or anger.
- **He ran!** In the ancient eastern culture, he broke all the rules. His father probably ran outside the village homestead to meet the prodigal, so that he could accompany him through the town to his house, bearing the shame with his son.
 - He ran in public.
 - To do this, he had to hike his tunic up and expose his legs, which was culturally very shameful.
 - When you give God an inch, he will give you a mile.
- **The KJV says "He fell on his son's neck," hugging him and kissing him, repeatedly.**
 - Because the prodigal stood ready to confess, he was able to experience God's love all the more.
 - Our experience with God depends a lot on our stance.
 - "God on the neck of a sinner" – what a great image of the Omnipotent God's love for us! Can you even conceive it? I don't think you can, but if you can't conceive it, I hope you will realize it.
- **The recklessly wasteful son couldn't even finish his rehearsed speech before the father speaks.**
 - God doesn't need time to think about "how" he will love us. He already settled that, eons ago, by his eternal covenant. He doesn't have to take any time to prepare for our return. That was taken care of by the life and sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ.
 - Titus 3:5 "*He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*"
 - The robe, the ring, the sandals, and the fatted calf.
- **The party was not entertainment** (as the older son saw it), it was not because of who the younger son was, it was the father's expression of joy. Why? Because, Jesus was saying, that's how God acts!
 - Quote by Oswald Chambers: "We trample the blood of the Son of God if we think we are forgiven because we are sorry for our sins. The only explanation for the forgiveness of God and for the unfathomable depth of His forgetting is the death of Jesus Christ. Our repentance is merely the outcome of our personal realization of the atonement which He has worked out for us. (*"When he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands...'"*) It does not matter who or what we are; there is absolute reinstatement into God (*the robe, the ring, the sandals, the calf*) by the death of Jesus Christ and by no other way, not because Jesus Christ pleads, but because He died. It is not earned, but accepted. All the pleading which deliberately refuses to recognize the Cross is of no avail; it is battering at a door other than the one that Jesus has opened. Our Lord does not pretend we are

all right when we are all wrong. The atonement is a propitiation whereby God, through the death of Jesus, makes an unholy man holy.”

His Brother’s jealous reaction was recklessly wasteful in how he treated his father and brother:

- **He wonders about the party, becomes angry and refuses to go in.**
- **He argues with his father, and here we see his true attitude. His argument betrays him:**
 - He sees himself as a slave, not a son. (He’s recklessly wasteful in his attitude and relationship).
 - He accuses his father that he has not given him even a young goat. This brother doesn’t realize he will actually own everything. (He’s recklessly wasteful in realizing his potential.)
 - He wants a goat for a party with his own friends. He wants nothing to do with the people in the house. (He’s recklessly wasteful in how he cares for his home, those who God has given him to be in his life).
 - He calls the prodigal “this son of yours,” not “my brother.” (He’s recklessly wasteful in how he treats his family, very much a we/they attitude).
 - He accuses his brother of sleeping with prostitutes. There was no previous mention of that. (He’s recklessly wasteful in his accusations).
- **He is just as sinful and just as alienated from his father as the younger son had been.**
- **His father’s response.**
 - Same love and compassion. (Leaves the party to talk to him).
 - “I didn’t throw you a party because you have had something better – a peaceful, lifelong satisfaction of being here, as a faithful son ought.
 - He reminds this son “All I have is yours.” And who is the father? God, our heavenly father. It is another amazing promise: **“All I have is yours.”**
 - This is the most beautiful and overlooked statement in the parable.
 - *It offers us a clue as to who the real prodigal is.*

Prodigal means - adj. “Exceedingly or recklessly wasteful. Lavish. Extravagant.” n. “One who gives or spends lavishly or foolishly.” Do you know what the opposite of “prodigal” is? Miserly. Close-fisted. Stingy. Hoarding.

- Do you see who the most prodigal one is? Do you see who is more prodigal than we know? The Father.
 - The father is as much a prodigal as either son is. Maybe more.
- **We have an incredible story of recklessly wasteful mercy and love. Prodigal love.**
- Our heavenly Father is prodigal.
 - What a challenge to us – we serve a prodigal God! He is lavish, and excessive.
 - We must respond by being prodigals for Christ!
- **We must also resist the natural trend that occurs.** Every younger son moves quickly to being an older son. It may be only matter of months before our attitudes shift, and we become the older son.
- **Jesus is calling his followers to be like the prodigal, recklessly wasteful father,** like our heavenly Father:
 - God gave us his Son, our Savior, who died on the cross.
 - He loves us with a love that will not let us go.
 - Rich Mullins “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, I cannot find in my own. And he keeps his fire burning to melt this heart of stone. Keeps me aching with a yearning, keeps me glad to have been caught, in the reckless raging fury that they call the love of God.”
 - We are recipients of the reckless, raging, prodigal fury that they call the love of God. That reckless raging fury that cost Jesus his life also paid the penalty for our sins. That prodigal love also raised Jesus from the dead!
- **The question for us today: What are we prodigals with?**
 - A lot of people are prodigals for themselves.
 - Some are prodigals for their families.
 - Even fewer are prodigals for friends.
 - But how many of us will be prodigals for God?
- **How do we express the recklessly wasteful love of God?**

- If you are like me, you can remember when people were recklessly wasteful in showing their love for you. For me, it happens when Leigh takes time to fix my favorite food or bring me a latte, for no reason. Or when my parents visit us for my children's performances and birthdays, just to let them know they are loved, driving to Wilmore on their way from Northern Michigan to Colorado. And I'll never forget in college when my sister Jaema drove an hour and a half from Purdue to DePauw "just to take me out for ice cream." What a waste of time and energy! Except that they honored me with their love. You can think of people who have done that for you. Just do like them!
- **We express it personally - in thoughts, words, and deeds.**
 - How many expressions of prodigal love would it have taken to prevent a suicide? An abortion? A shooting? A decision to sell yourself?
 - How many expressions would it have taken to prevent Columbine? Or Paducah? Or Oklahoma City? Or even 9/11? How many prodigal people, lavishing the love of Jesus Christ would it have taken to deter even one of those attackers?
 - How much pain and loneliness could be eliminated if someone took the time to show a person about Jesus' prodigal love? How many encounters until that person would realize the truth, that there is hope? That there is someone to care? That it matters whether they live or die?
- **We express it to those around us – in our love, our attention, and our time.**
 - We must go out of our way in our love: to visit friends, to visit people who need someone, loving those who can't possibly love you back.
 - We must go out of our way in our time: being recklessly wasteful in playing with our children, spending time with them, pouring energy into them.
 - We must go out of our way for our spouse: in giving love, in giving time, and in serving.
- **We express it as the body of Christ.**
 - What if our churches were less stingy and less miserly with God's love, forgiveness, and blessing?
 - Do people even know that returning home is an option?
 - As Christians, we must express it personally and be the church God had in mind. We must show people the recklessly wasteful love of God and his forgiveness. We get the main thing the main thing: God is crazy about all people! He has lavishly, wastefully sent his Son Jesus Christ; that we might have life, life abundantly – lavishly, recklessly, wastefully loving and following him. So let's go!