

September 20, 2020

The Prodigal
How Content Are You?
Luke 15:11-32

Opening words Today, I conclude my two-part sermon series, *The Prodigal*. The Parable of the Prodigal Son has also been called The Parable of the Lost Son, The Parable of the Two Brothers, The Parable of the Loving Father, and The Parable of the Forgiving Father. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is the third and final parable in a series of three parables on redemption, behind the Parable of the Lost Coin and the Parable of the Lost Sheep. Like all parables, the Parable of the Prodigal Son teaches us a single point, God loves all sinners. Our scripture reading for today is the same as last week, Luke 15:11-32. Let me call this message *How Content Are You?*

Luke 15:11-32 Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So, he divided his property between them.

¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So, they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸ "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young

goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

We find ourselves today in the fifteen chapter of Luke. Do you remember the material we recovered last week? A man had two sons. The younger son went to his father and asked for his share of the inheritance. It was an unusual request. Still today, the inheritance is not given until after death. The individual needs his or her estate to cover his or her own expenses. Yet, in the story, the father grants his son’s request. With cash in hand, he leaves home and for a short time lives life in the fast lane. He has a great time until the money runs out. So, basically, with his tail between his legs, he returns home, where his loving father celebrates his return. However, the elder son is not so welcoming.

While his younger brother was out there making memories, he was at home working. Two-thousand years later, it does not seem fair. Anyone who has ever felt overwhelmed by responsibility can relate. Occasionally, I have uttered those words, *“The next time I am going to be the irresponsible one.”* Perhaps, it was the fatted calf that pushed him over the edge. Sometimes, you must take a stand. The older brother refuses to go to his younger brother’s welcome home party. Looking for family harmony, the father goes to his elder son and begs him to attend. After all, they are brothers. The elder son retaliates with a weapon I understand, sarcasm. He reminds his father of his faithfulness. He has been *enslaved* to him for years and has nothing to show for his loyalty. Then, he digs deeper and turns the knife. Verse 30 says, *“But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”* The words seem to fall on deaf ears. There is no other way to say it.

The older son is mad. He is mad at his little brother for leaving him to do all the work. He is also mad at his father because he feels underappreciated. However, he is also mad at himself. There is part of him who is envious of his brother. While his brother is out there making memories that will last a lifetime, he was working. While his brother is out there doing what he wanted to do, he was doing what other people expected him to do. There is a world of difference. There is something about his little brother he respects. Envy is defined as, *a feeling of discontented or resentful longing aroused by someone else’s possessions, qualities, or luck.* In the end, he is mad at himself. That leads me to the question of the day: How content are you? Envy has the potential of robbing us of today’s joy and blinding us to today’s blessings. If that makes you think, say, **“Amen!”**

If you ask the internet highway, how envy or jealousy is harmful, you will get these answers.

- 1. Envy gives you a bad attitude.** Envy is a negative emotion. Envy will lead you into crippling negativity.
- 2. Envy threatens your financial stability.** Trying to live at someone else's lifestyle is the beginning of the end, financially.
- 3. Envy will prevent you from being a good employee.** Envy does not make you a team player at work and in the end will ruin your career.
- 4. Envy can lead to substance abuse.** Envy produces anxiety and we cope with anxiety in negative ways, alcohol, over shopping, over-eating, etc.
- 5. Envy promotes self-doubt.** Life is unfair. Some are born with more gifts and resources than others. Envy makes us feel like failures.
- 6. Envy frustrates progress.** If you believe in the power of positive thinking, then the opposite is true. Negative thinking produces negative results.

If those six things make you think say, **"Amen!"**

Earlier this week, I had my annual one on one DS consultation with our District Superintendent, Abby Auman. We did it virtually by Zoom. I sat in my office in the church, and she sat in her home office. She had a colorful rainbow mural behind her. She asked me how I was doing. I am fine. She asked me about my plans. I really do not have any. Every day is a new adventure. I am living my dream. When my consultation was over, I found myself reviewing my time in the ministry. I have had a great ride!

I have been in the ministry nearly thirty-seven years; thirty-three years working within the United Methodist Church. I started off as a Youth Director in Frankfort, Indiana. That was when I was a student at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. I was not much of a Youth Director. When I transferred to Asbury Theological Seminary near Lexington, Kentucky, I became the pastor of the Pleasant Grove Christian Church near Lancaster, Kentucky. They were very patient with me. I transferred to the United Methodist Church when I was nearing graduation and served three small-membership churches: the Morristown Charge, including Morristown, Lloydsville and Bannock, in the old Saint Clairsville District. They were truly kind to me. When Kathryn and I got married, I served the Waltz United Methodist Church for a single year, in the old Wooster District. I felt guilty for leaving them so soon. In 1989, I was appointed the pastor of the Hathaway United Methodist Church, in Garfield Heights. I stayed there five years. During my time that church did well. That church is now closed. In 1994, I was appointed here and started my twenty-sixth year of service here in June. Of my thirty-

seven years in the ministry, twenty-six have been spent here. That means, I have spent 70% of my time in the ministry here with you. Do you remember the question of the day?

How content are you with your life? In May, I turned sixty-three years old. That is a good sample size, so I feel qualified to answer the question. I am content with my life to this point. There was a time in my life when I was more ambitious. There was a time in my life when I dreamed of winning the world for Jesus Christ, the bigger the better, but no more. Now, I am just trying to survive. Yes, I have turned down opportunities to advance my career. I have said it a million times. I came here for my parents, who were aging. I stayed here for my children because this was a good place to grow up. I did not want them to become Methodist nomads. I stay here for me because I consider this place home. Each one of you is important to me. We have an odd relationship. I am not your friend and I am not your superior. I am your pastor. My only regret is that I lost years in the ministry worrying about moving, and I refuse to lose any more years worrying about retiring. Someone once told me I committed professional suicide by staying here, but that never bothered me. Why? Because, the ministry is not a career, it is a calling. In my heart of hearts, I know that God wants me here, and I trust God will tell me when it is time to go. God has been good to me. I am a blessed man because I have a contented life. The question is not if I have a contented life, the question is, do *you* have a contented life? How do you answer the question?

Years ago, this church had an employee by the name of Carl. He was not just the custodian; he was the most important person in the church. He had held that position for twenty-five years and everything went through Carl. Every meeting in those days ended the same way. Someone would say, "I will check with Carl." It was Carl who gave the thumbs up or the thumbs down. Do not get me wrong, Carl was a gifted man in many ways, but he was not the ultimate authority. By the time I arrived, Carl's performance was on the way down, but few complained, because it was Carl. No one complained until Carl never came to work, and we still paid him. (This is a good place to work.) He had his church friends doing his job. When the end finally came, it was awkward. The board voted to send him a registered letter. It was sent, and Carl was gone. However, Carl was not really gone.

A staff appreciation day was organized and everyone on staff, including Carl, was invited. Some wanted to thank Carl for his years of service. That was a nice thing to do. Everyone on staff was there. The long-time organist was there. The long-time secretary was there. The short-term choir director was invited. I was invited. Carl was invited, and Carl came. At the right moment, kind words were expressed, a prayer was uttered, and small gifts were distributed. When it was all over, I walked up to Carl and shook his hand. I said, "Carl, twenty-five years is a long time; you should be proud." I still think about his response to that statement. He said, "I would be proud, if I was proud of what I had done." What I heard Carl say was, he did not live up to his own expectations. He did not have a contented life, because he longed to do more. His body

language told me, he felt like a failure. I felt bad for Carl because contentment was a million miles away. Can you relate to that story?

How content are you with your life? Like Carl, the elder son was not content with his life. In a certain way he felt like a failure because he did not do what he wanted to do. This is the truth. Envy must be balanced. Unchecked envy has the potential of blinding us to our daily blessings, but controlled envy has a way of calling us to do more. What do you still want to do? Do you remember the definition of envy? It is *a feeling of discontented or resentful longing aroused by someone else's possessions, qualities, or luck*. How content are you?