

This morning we come to that wonderful story which many of us learned in Sunday School and which has been so beautifully portrayed by numerous artists including Rembrandt – the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Prodigal is not a word I use very often so I looked it up and found that it means “spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant.”

In the story, the younger son takes his inheritance in cash, goes away and blows it all. He spends his money freely and recklessly, living a life of wasteful extravagance. No-one forced him to do it. He may have had friends along the way who suggested that it might be better to hold back on the spending, but our protagonist didn't listen. Let's call him Buddy. Buddy didn't want to think about what would happen when the money ran out. He figured something would come along. He'd strike it rich or win the lottery, or maybe meet a rich widow. Whatever.

But that didn't happen and finally he found himself at the end of all his resources. He had to take any job that came. And the job that came was looking after pigs – which were of course unclean to the Jews. Perhaps today Bud might find himself working for a plumber unplugging toilets and snaking sewer lines or on a farm shoveling manure, mucking out the cow barns. Buddy was not well paid and he was so hungry that he found himself envying the pigs the feed they got.

I imagine that Buddy had left home very full of himself and sure that he was going to make his way in the world without any more help from his family. It must have been really hard to consider going back. To consider going home and admitting that he had failed, that he had run through all his inheritance and had nothing to show for it. Buddy had hit bottom.

So he went back. He went back home because he figured at least there the servants got enough to eat.

Buddy didn't expect a big celebration when he turned up on foot, smelly and hungry. He didn't expect that anyone would be glad to see him after the way he'd behaved.

Surprise!!

His dad was thrilled. His brother wasn't. And of course things were different. I imagine they all had quite a period of adjustment. It wasn't a small thing that half of his father's estate had been spent freely and recklessly on a wastefully extravagant fling. I don't know whether Buddy was given an allowance or whether he had to muck out the stables.

There must have been consequences to his behavior. Perhaps not the consequences his brother would have liked to see but things would be different. Just because his father was thrilled to have Buddy home doesn't mean that he was able to go on living the way he had been. His prodigal life was over.

I see something rather similar happening for humanity today. We have lived a prodigal life. We have spent "resources freely and recklessly; we have been wastefully extravagant." and we continue to do so. According to the Global Footprint Network, an international research organization that makes an annual assessment of how far humankind is falling into ecological debt, it would take 1.7 Planet Earth's to sustain humanity's current lifestyle. Climate change, deforestation, overgrazing, fisheries collapse, food insecurity, and the rapid extinction of species are all part

of a single, over-arching problem: Humanity is simply demanding more from the Earth than it can provide.¹

We are Buddy, we are the Prodigal Son; but we have not yet turned back, we have not reached the point where the discomfort caused by our addiction to over-consumption is so great that we are willing to change.

The recent flooding in the Mid-West is a reminder that although we may not be willing to change, the climate is changing. Unexpected flooding exacerbated by climate change - four states have declared states of emergency, and more flooding is expected through May. Untold crops and perhaps a million calves have been lost. And yet our leadership continues to put short-term profit ahead of long-term planning by doing things like backing out of the historic Paris Accord, rolling back emissions control through the Clean Power Act and lifting regulations on construction in flood zones.

It makes as much sense as Buddy spending everything he had and hoping that something would turn up.

And it's not just here in the States. Three weeks ago a deadly cyclone hit three African countries leaving hundreds dead and 600,000 people without homes. And now they are dealing with a cholera outbreak. The cyclone created a huge inland lake 15 miles wide by 80 miles long. That's an area of 1200 square miles which is more than Santa Barbara county, San Luis Obispo county and Monterey county combined. Imagine all the people who have lost everything under that lake.

It is the poorest people in the world who suffer the most soonest from climate change. Yet it is the rich people of the world who create the most carbon. We are the Prodigal son, and it's time we went home. It's time that we said enough is enough and returned home.

¹ <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/our-work/climate-change/>

That's what repentance is. It's saying it's a mess and it's time to go home and deal with it. It's time to get real with God.

And amazingly, God is waiting. God isn't just waiting, she's craning her neck out the window hoping that she'll see us on the road home.

If and when we turn back to God we can be sure that we will be welcomed. We can be sure that God will be thrilled to see us. So thrilled that he'll throw a party. A party of grace.

But we have to turn, and we have to take responsibility for our prodigal lifestyle. I'm not sure what that will mean for you or for me as individuals. I think it means looking every day at how we can reduce waste, how we can reduce our own carbon footprint, how we can live more simply. As we pray and ask for guidance the Holy Spirit will prompt each one of us to take the next step – perhaps its carpooling or seeing how little waste you can create, or supporting a political organization or one that helps poorer countries to deal with the problems created by climate change.

Yet the big changes are going to come when cities and counties and states and federal government take climate change seriously. And that is going to take political action on our part. We have to make our voices heard, our concerns known. It is time for us to repent of our prodigal lifestyle and make that repentance known in the public square.

God is waiting.

God is not going to miraculously intervene and make things different, because humanity has free will. But God is waiting and God will always welcome us home.

The planet is not going to be the same place for our grandchildren as it has been for us. But it's **not** too late to return to the God who not only welcomes us with open arms but is ready to teach us a different way to be.

I firmly believe that when we take action for the common good, when we take action to love God with all that we have and our neighbor as ourselves that that action is supported by the power of the Spirit. I imagine that it was very hard for Buddy to make the decision to leave the pig-sty, admit defeat and head home. But as he began on the road it got just a little bit easier as everyday he knew it was the only thing he could do.

Right now there's a snowball effect exacerbating and accelerating climate change, but there is still time for humanity to turn and God will lend God's power to ours so that there will also be a snowball effect as we develop the political will to act quickly, as we reduce our ecological footprint, and as we give the planet a chance to heal.

I don't know how long it's going to take us to turn our footsteps back to God. But I do know that whenever we make that choice, whenever we say enough is enough, God is waiting for us and God is running down the road to greet us lest we become discouraged and turn away again. Let us this morning as we pray for healing for ourselves and others open our hearts to hear the Spirit telling us where we need to turn and return in repentance, and look for newness of life.