

**FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT**  
**Sermon—March 31, 2019**



Bartolomé Esteban Murillo "The Return of the Prodigal Son" 1667-1670  
National Gallery of Art—Washington, D.C.



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**Fourth Sunday of Lent**

**March 31, 2019**

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**“The Return of the Prodigal Son”**

*(Luke 15:1-3;11-32)*

Rev. David K. Groth

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...  
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

**Collect:** Almighty God, our heavenly Father, Your mercies are new every morning; and though we deserve only punishment, You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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So the Pharisees and Scribes noticed many tax collectors and sinners gathering around Jesus, and they grumbled. “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” Jesus doesn’t argue the point. Instead, he tells them a story about a man and his two sons. The younger does the unthinkable. Essentially he says to his father, “Old man, I can no longer wait for you to die. I need to live, but I can’t do that working the fields all my life. How ‘bout you give me my part of your estate now.” It’s a brazen, self-centered request, but the father lets him have it his way.

The young man goes off to the far country and blows the whole pile on liquor and sex and fancy clothes. He’s got a bucket list, and he’s starting to check items off one by one. They are hyper-expensive, hyper-selfish. I doubt tithing is on his bucket list, nor washing dishes at the soup kitchen. No, it’s all about him. He figures life is short. This is all there is, and pretty soon he’ll be too old to do much of anything. Once you kick the bucket, you’re done. Game over. No more adventure; no more fine food. So you have to seize the day. His life turns into a never ending Margi-Gras without Lent; it’s a casino buffet which knows no fast.

The only trouble is, he has no income; only expenditures. Before he runs out of things to do, he runs out of money. Then disaster really strikes. There’s a famine in the land, and just like that he’s destitute. He’s lost it all. He thinks himself a victim . . . of the famine, of the economy; a victim of inflated prices and high unemployment and shallow friends and a weak federal safety net; a victim of casinos that rigged the odds and of his pack a day smoking habit.

He knows he has to work or starve. He takes the only

job he can find . . . at a pig farm of all places. He keeps the job just long enough to notice that the owner treats his pigs better than he does his people. Then it dawns on him: “How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough to eat, but here I am starving!”

Notice, there’s no sign of remorse over what he’s done, how he broke his father’s heart . . . only a deep lament over his new and lowly status. There’s no indication he thinks of his dad as anything more than a meal ticket. He decides to go home because he knows his old man will have to take him in, and he’ll get three good meals a day, and for a man on the edge of starvation that’s reason enough.

On the way home he starts working up a manipulative little speech, one that will soften the old man’s heart enough that the door won’t be slammed in his face. He refines it, polishes it, rehearses it over and over, to get the inflection just right, and the posture and the gestures. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” Notice the word “hired”? He’ll work if he must, so long as he’s paid.

Just about the time he has the speech down pat, he rounds the corner, and apparently the old man has already spotted him and is running, a full on sprint. Clearly it’s been many years since he’s run, but he’s going as fast as his old legs will carry him, down the lane, robes flying, embarrassing himself. The servants are wondering what the emergency is. The old man throws his arms around his son, nearly knocking him off his feet. Then the boy launches into his speech. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I am not worthy to be called your son.” I don’t think the father hears a bit of it. The boy is back, and for now, that’s all that matters. Who cares why he’s back?

The old man doesn’t do what other fathers would do. He doesn’t say he hopes he’s learned his lesson. He doesn’t say he hopes the boy is finally ready to settle down and learn the value of hard work. He doesn’t say “You’ll have to find a way to make this up to your mother and me.” In fact, he

doesn't say anything to his son, with words. But he is barking orders to his servants. "Quick! Bring the best robe. And a ring! Bring a ring! And shoes for his feet. And go get the fattened calf and kill it and let's eat and celebrate." The servants looked confused, so the father says, "My son was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

If you would, please have a look at the front cover of the bulletin. It's a 17<sup>th</sup> century oil painting by a Spanish artist named Bartolome Esteban Murillo. It's called *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and it hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

First notice the son's appearance. He's disheveled. His hair is unkempt, his face unshaven, his shirt has nearly given up the ghost. His pants are also in tatters. And can you smell the aroma of the pig farm wafting from him? Good thing this painting is not a scratch and sniff! The dog seems excited to see his long lost master, but is also taking in the stench.

The young man's feet stand out. They are dirty and dusty, bruised and worn. They are likely throbbing from the journey. He doesn't even have sandals, which means he has nothing: nothing to offer, nothing to give. He looks the beggar's part and is playing it too.

That is us, of course. The son is us. We have wandered far from our heavenly Father. We have our own bucket list of hyper-expensive, hyper-selfish experiences. If you're the average Lutheran, tithing probably isn't on your bucket list, or mucking out a neighbor's basement after the flood. My will and desires do not often align very well with the Father's, nor do yours. When we can, we do what brings us pleasure, without regard to whether it pleases him or saddens him. Sometimes we get it into our heads we can manipulate him later, say something to him that comes off humble and contrite, while our hearts are far from him. And we really have nothing to offer him, nothing he needs. Our clothing is torn and tattered. Our feet are bare and bruised. Our sin has done a number on us, and it reeks before him. The son is us. Luther said, "Before God, we are all

beggars.”

Now look at the father. He is at the center and that’s appropriate because the story is really about him, his extraordinary love and forgiveness and grace. There’s nothing new or rare about young men and women rebelling against their parents. But in all the other religions of the world, you’ll find no one like this father. If you want or need the loving Father to run down the lane for you, he won’t be found anywhere else, in any of the other sacred writings, in any of the other gods of the nations. If you need the Father who lavishes his love and gifts on reeking sinners, you’ll find him no where else. If you want the Father who, with all heaven, rejoices over one sinner that repents, you’ll only find him here.

In the painting, the father is a big man. He has strong hands, but you can see gentleness in his hands too. Notice the expression in his face. This is not a hallelujah celebration, as some artists have painted. This is a quiet moment. There’s even a hint of sadness in the father’s eyes. Forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation. . . it’s a painful business. The father is not pretending everything is just fine when it isn’t. But notice, the father isn’t angry either. He is not giving his son the back of his hand or a kick in the rear. The father is looking on his son with love, and concern, and relief, and with forgiveness. He’s just glad to have him back home. Clearly the boy is still a work in progress, but it’s also clear he does not need to reapply for his spot in the family. The father’s embrace in front of all the others has already restored him.

It is the image of our heavenly Father. He does not belittle us. He is not looking to vent his anger on us. He will not give us the cold shoulder. He loves us and cares for us. This is Jesus – the image of God and his forgiving love for us. And this story tells the Pharisees and Scribes why the sinners and tax collectors are drawing near to Jesus, and why he’s just glad to have them within his orbit, even if they are still works in progress. Maybe the Pharisees and Scribes even saw there might be room and welcome for them too,

though they too would be works in progress.

Finally, have a look at the servants to the right of the father. You recall the father had sent them off to fetch the best robe for his son, and a ring for his hand, and shoes for his feet. Here they are. One is holding a clean shirt and a silk robe and new pair of sandals. The other is holding a ring. The painting invites us to think ahead, after the son has taken a good, long hot bath and has shaved and put on fresh, clean clothes. After working outside all day in the cold, how good it is to come inside and shower off the smoke and grease and dirt. How good it is then to put on clean, comfortable clothing, and sit down to a nice meal. I bet this boy felt like a new man, having had a chance to clean up and put on the new clothes given him. He begins a new day, forgiven and restored by his father.

New clothing, more specifically a new robe, the very best one. New man. In the Epistle lesson Paul writes, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

You’ve been baptized. You believe in him, sometimes more, sometimes less, but you believe in him. You are in Christ. You have been made a new creation.

Scripture gives the sense it’s an already but not yet sort of thing. You are already in Christ through baptism. You’ve already been made a new creation. You were created in the image of God. That was lost with sin. But in Christ, the image is being restored. You’ve been made a new creation, but the image of God has not yet been fully restored in you. You are still a work in progress. There’s more to do, more to repent of, more to turn away from.

But for now, just take in the Father’s love. You’ve wallowed with the pigs. Now wallow in the love of God in Christ Jesus, whose blood cleanses you. You were in the far country. Now you are in the strong arms of his embrace. You were lost and out of his orbit. He has brought you back in. Your clothes reeked and were in tatters. He has clothed you with the resplendent robe of Christ’s righteousness. God has reconciled you to himself through Christ, and is not

counting your trespasses against you. You were, in a very real way starving, but there's the fattened calf. Unfortunate for him, but it's a reminder there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood.

In sin, we were as good as dead. In Christ's forgiveness, we are alive again. We were lost but have been found. Thanks be to God! Amen.