So, we are in the Second Sunday of Lent, a time of introspection, confession, prayer and preparation. It’s a good time to pull out the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Because many of us know this parable so well, I am reading from The Message translation, which has a more modern tone.

By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." Their grumbling triggered this story.

Then he said, "There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’ It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had.

After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any. That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’

He got right up and went home to his father. When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’ ‘But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here - given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

"All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day’s work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the
houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, ‘Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast - barbecued beef! - because he has him home safe and sound.’ "The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in.

His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son said, 'Look how many years I’ve stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on (prostitutes) shows up and you go all out with a feast!'

"His father said, 'Son, you don’t understand. You’re with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours - but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he’s alive! He was lost, and he’s found!'"

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First off, who named this *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*? The word “prodigal” is not even in there! And is this parable even about the younger son? Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t.

There is a son who blows it. We all know about him. You may have one of those in your family, or you might even be a recovering prodigal son or daughter yourself. *(Hopefully you’re recovering!)* Take the inheritance and squander it in a distant country. Been there, done that!

Funny thing about this, in other translations, Jesus says the father, “*divided his property between them.*” *(15:12b)(NRSV)* So he splits it between the younger and the elder son. The younger son squanders his half away, leaving the other half to the elder son, and nothing to the father. You ever think about that? It’s as if the father has died. It’s as if the younger son says, “I wish you were dead. Give me my inheritance now!”

Prodigal sons and daughters are a dime-a-dozen. It’s not hard to go to a “distant country,” or to squander your life away. It doesn’t require an education, or any discipline to do that. The only requirement is self-absorption. There’s nothing all that impressive about it.

And it’s no surprise that this younger son ends up in a pigpen. Who didn’t see that coming? For a Jew, the worse place you could end up is eating with the pigs! By law, pork is unclean. People who make bad decisions end up in bad places. No news there either.

There’s also nothing novel about this guy coming to himself and wanting to go home. Isn’t that what we hope every wayward child does? People who blow it often want a second chance. So far, Jesus isn’t telling us anything we don’t already know.

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Then Jesus has this younger son come up with a plan to go home. But the twist is that the father, whom he wished dead, will not hear of his plan to be a servant and
reinstates him to the status of sonship. The robe, the ring, the sandals, a fatted calf and a party! Wow! He didn’t deserve any of that. That’s new.

So if that was the end of this little story, we could call it, The Parable of the Prodigal Son, but it’s not the end.

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The elder son comes out of what I would call the field of duty. That’s actually where I live.

- I was 15 when I took my first part-time job, and I worked after school in a Men’s Clothing store.

- I worked through college as a Youth Director, graduated and went straight into seminary for 3 years. (Sounds like prison!)

- Took my first church right out of seminary. Later did a residency in Pastoral Counseling, then a Doctor of Ministry degree, and served four more churches and two interims over 40 years!

- All that time, I have been a son, a husband, a father and now a grandfather.

- I get an annual physical, have my teeth cleaned, get my eyes checked, workout (sometimes), and try to read a book a month. And I floss!

- I have the oil changed in the cars every 3,000 miles – and the tires rotated like clockwork.

- My father taught me that “If you’re going to take the job then do it. If you’re not going to do it, then don’t take the job.” My mother taught me, “Don’t always listen to your father!” (Not really!)

It’s the field of duty. That’s where many of us live. People like us take the job and we do it! We get up early and go to bed late and take care of everything in between. People depend on us and we deliver. You could say we are the “elder sons and daughters” in Jesus’ parable. There may be a streak of prodigal in us, but we’re the ones who stay home and do what is expected of us, and maybe even more.

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Here’s where you want to remember to whom Jesus was telling this parable. This is NRSV;

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable; (15:1-3)

He told the parable to the scribes and Pharisees who were upset because he “welcomes sinners and eats with them.” They are the grumbling elder sons and daughters in the parable. Jesus is hanging out with the wrong people!

Tax collectors were Jews who collected taxes from their own people to give to the oppressive Roman Empire. They were like traitors. And sinners are sinners.

From the Jewish perspective, God favors the righteous and punishes the wicked. What’s Jesus doing hanging out with tax collectors and sinners? That’s the wrong side.

* Why do we elder sons and daughters have so much trouble with mercy and grace?

‘Listen! (says the elder son) For all these years I’ve been working like a slave for you and I’ve never disobeyed your commands; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ (15:29-30) (NRSV)

I could have said all that. As much as I hate to admit it, I understand the elder son. I can easily become irritated with someone who purposefully squanders their potential, throws away their opportunities, neglects their duties and obligations and becomes totally self-absorbed. (Not that I have ever done that!) They should suffer the consequences of their behavior, so they’ll wake up and do the right thing. You don’t want to bail them out. That sends the wrong message. No party! I get it.

And where is the justice? Some say it is in the pigpen. The younger son suffered the consequences of his behavior. He came home humbly asking to be a servant. He did come to his senses. The father is not endorsing all that slanderous behavior.

Here’s new thought. If the father divided his property between both sons, and the younger son squandered his half, then he has to live off of the elder son’s half. Jesus would likely say, “Don’t push the parable too far.” You can see the rub.
Henri Nouwen studied Rembrandt’s painting of the Prodigal Son. The prodigal is kneeling in rags before the father who embraces him. The elder son is standing erect in regal clothing, arms crossed, refusing to even look at the scene. Nouwen writes,

*Both sons needed healing and forgiveness. Both needed to come home. Both needed the embrace of a forgiving father. But from the story itself, as well as from Rembrandt’s painting, it is clear that the hardest conversion to go through is the conversion of the one who stayed home.*

(Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son; A Story of Homecoming*, p. 65-66)

It’s the elder son who cannot go into the party. He’s paralyzed by his own self-made goodness. The party is too extravagant, too unfair, too irresponsible for him to participate. Nouwen calls it “the lost-ness of a resentful saint.” (Nouwen, p. 71)

How many of us have stood outside that party of compassion; stood in a place of resentment and self-righteousness? It’s a different kind of pigpen, isn’t it? It’s a different way to be lost.

The “field of duty” can become a “pigpen.” One son is lost in self-indulgence, the other in self-righteousness. They are equally lost, but the father’s love, God’s love, is equally unconditional for both. The father grieves for both sons. He comes out to meet the younger son at the gate. He comes out of the party to invite the elder son to come into the celebration.

All this time, we thought it was about that squandering younger son. We even named the parable after him. Isn’t that exactly what an elder son or daughter might do? But it’s not about him. Jesus uses this little story to hold up a mirror to the elder sons and daughter, and to invite us into the “Party of Grace!” The question always remains, “Will we go in?”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: Amen