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2 Corinthians 5:14-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
The Prodigal Son

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. (Luke 15:13, KJV)

When our dear son David journeyed into the far country of Albany, New York, he bought himself a little creature of the forest and plains. He bought himself a ferret. David has always loved God's creatures.

Now, throughout his childhood, David had lobbied for a ferret, and I had always said no. I kept reminding David of the Arnold Schwarzenegger movie *Kindergarten Cop* (1990) where a pet ferret ran up the arm of the bad guy and bit him on the neck. I was sure he got the carotid artery, though David did not remember it that way.

Anyway, David long lobbied for a ferret and I always said no. But when David journeyed into the far country of Albany, he bought himself a ferret. They sell them there in Albany. In fact, they sell them in most parts of America and it turns out that they are popular pets. There are about 800,000 ferret pets here in America and, correcting for the ratios of dogs to ferrets in our land, dog bites outnumber ferret bites five to one.¹ But, then, David knew all that from his boyhood research, and now, as a young man on his own, he has himself a ferret.

That's fine. That's okay, up there in Albany. But suppose that when David graduates someday, he wants to bring his ferret home? Then, the heart of this old father will be tested.

Let's shift over to the Prodigal Son in the Bible story. Picture that great moment when, as the Bible puts it, the young man "comes to himself." (Luke 15:17) The trance into which his newfound freedom and wealth launched him has at last broken. He raises his head, surveys his situation, and has enough strength of spirit left to acknowledge that he has erred. He has "wasted his substance," which is a solemn way to phrase things. It is not just that he has been a spendthrift and has burned his way through his money, but something deeper has happened. The Greek word here is "ousia." He has wasted his "ousia." It means his very being. The young man has laid waste to himself, like an attacking army laying low everything in sight, wrecking and ruining things. That is what the young man has done to *himself*. He has journeyed, but not journeyed well, so that he finds himself in that inevitable land of poverty -- poverty of pocket and poverty of soul, the

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferret>

ultimate destination of sin if it is not checked. Miserable sin! That's where it will always take us if we are not careful: it will land us in a situation where our very being is left in wreck and ruin.

Our text says that when this young man "comes to himself," he enters upon some fruitful reflections. I am so very happy for that. I am so very happy for this young man that he did not go in the other direction -- the direction of despair. No, this young man turns to some hopeful thoughts. He thinks of the hired servants back home. He now appreciates their situation, though before he might not even have noticed them. He admires them for their management of life such that, though they are simply hired men and women, rather than entrepreneurs or kings of industry, still they are better off than he is, though he be a true son of the father. They have shelter in a tough world. They have shelter from today's wind and rain. They have a roof over their head, a bed to sleep in, food to eat, and honorable labor to occupy the day, while he, the beloved son, lives in the pigsty and longs for the husks the animals eat.

Not only does the young man reckon with his misery and the better position of the hired servants back home, but also he gets up and does what needs to be done. He heads home. It is one thing to acknowledge that you have erred, another to admit that those who have not erred as you have done are better off for it, and yet something else too to rouse yourself and try to get yourself back on track. This young man did that. He roused himself and headed back home.

Now, our text does not say it, but let us imagine that before heading home, the young man stops off to say goodbye to his former friends -- the ones with whom he wasted his substance in riotous living.

"Hi, Prodigal Son. What's up? How you doing?"

"Well, truth be told, I haven't been doing well. Look at me! I'm standing here skinny and in rags. I don't have two nickels to rub together. I've sinned against heaven and against my dear old father. I've messed things up."

"What ya goin' to do?"

"I'm heading home."

"Can we come with you?"

Now, there's an interesting question. "Can we come with you?" Why would his old friends want to come with him? They were the ones who had exploited him. They got him to join in riotous living, and when the money ran out, they turned away from him. "No one gave him anything," as the Bible puts it. So, why would this ragtag group of friends in the far country want to come with the Prodigal Son and go to his home?" After all, some other fool is likely to come

along, and they can rip that young man off too. They can probably go on in their ways if they want.

But the thing is, it was not just the Prodigal Son who had wasted his substance in riotous living. His friends had been doing the same. They too had wasted their own being, their “ousia.” They too had laid siege to their own souls. They too had caused wreck and ruin in their own lives. They too had drifted on toward poverty and the ruination of their prospects. And let us imagine them to be tired of it. Let us imagine that seeing the Prodigal Son repentant and heading home has set off a spark of repentance in them too. And so they make their request, “Can we come too?”

Well, my theory is that if the Prodigal Son says yes and brings home his ragtag friends, then the heart of that old father back home is going to be tested.

Now ponder this good point: The ragtag friends do not need to remain ragtag. Indeed, it would be wise of them to learn the ways of the father on the way home. It would be prudent for them to stick close to the son and to learn from him the values of the household to which they are headed. It would be a very fine idea for them to learn a new notion of what is good and true and lovely in a human life. They are heading home under the protection of the son. Pilgrims as they are, let them occupy themselves in learning from the son the ways of that good household. If they want to go on wasting their substance in riotous living, then, fine, so be it. But if they want a better way of life, it is high time for them to turn to it.

So, the son and his friends arrive home. His father has been hoping for his return. His eyes have been sweeping the horizon daily, looking for his son. And there he is! The old man gathers together his robe, so that he does not trip, and runs to his son and embraces the lad. After a moment he looks up and says to his son,

“Son, who is the crowd? Who are these folks?”

“They are my friends. I have brought them home. They need shelter too.”

And the father, good and gentle man that he is, welcomes his son and his ragtag friends back home. (I bet the older brother is not going to like this one bit!)

Now, let’s ask that question once more:

Son, who are these folks traveling with you?

And dear folks of this congregation, listen to this marvelous answer: *We* are they! You and I. We are the ragtag friends welcomed into the home of the Father for the sake of the Son.

Now, let us turn to St. Paul and this morning’s Epistle Reading. Run through some of the beautiful lines of that Reading and apply them to yourself:

¹⁷Therefore, if any one is *in Christ*, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17, RSV)

As it was with the ragtag friends in my story, so it is with you and me. We are bound for newness. As the son in the parable traveled back home bringing his friends with him, so Jesus Christ, notorious for being a “friend of sinners,” has returned home to heaven, and you and I get to tag along.

You might object that there is dissimilarity between the true parable and my version of it in that Jesus was innocent, while the Prodigal Son was lost in sin. And yet, this observation does not disprove my version of the story but rather draws us nearer to the awful drama of what Christ did for us. Was Jesus innocent on the Cross? Well, in his own right, as a measure of the purity of his own life, Jesus was indeed innocent. And yet, we believe that on the Cross, Jesus bore your sins and my sins. That was the cry of John the Baptist concerning Jesus at the very start of our Lord’s ministry:

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. (John 1:29, KJV)

Likewise, listen again to the final verse in this morning’s Epistle Reading:

For our sake he made him *to be sin who knew no sin*, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21, RSV)

And why did Jesus have to cry out from that Cross:

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?* that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46, KJV)

Was it not because in taking upon the sins of the world, Jesus had exchanged the glorious robes of Transfiguration Sunday for the rags and soil of a sinful humanity?

That is, to be true to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, we would have to modify the story of the Prodigal Son to imagine him journeying to a far land, and remaining absolutely innocent himself, but acquiring some sketchy friends whom he brings home to the Father, and because of the Father’s love for the Son, he loves these ragtag friends too.

What I’m saying is that you and I are very blessed people to have the protection of our friend Jesus. And St. Paul tells us that the appropriate thing for us now is to do what we can to be worthy of Jesus and to take on His nature. Our job is to become like him, so that his innocence takes shape in our lives and we become more innocent too. And His righteousness is to take shape in our lives so that we become righteous too. I’ve already emphasized the first part of our final

Epistle verse. Now let me emphasize the second part:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that *in him we might become the righteousness of God*. (2 Corinthians 5:21, RSV)

After all, it is *in him* that we are welcome into the Father's house. It is in his friendship, in his ways and in his virtues that we become crafted for the kingdom.

To this Son who journeys into a far land, brings home sinners and asks them to become saints, be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.