

St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John D. Rohrs
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It's easy, centuries later, to romanticize Jesus. It's easy to make him warm and approachable, a caricature of kindness. But that doesn't do justice to how people saw him at the time. He was scandalous – because of what he said and even more because of who he loved. “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!” the Pharisees cried. It sounds innocuous – sharing a meal – but Jesus was always breaking boundaries. He was a threat to the social and religious norms of his day.

Well, Jesus hears this critique, and as usual, he responds with a story. It's a story you may know – the parable of the prodigal son. You may know it because you've heard it before, or maybe because you've lived it, one way or another. It's such a relatable story, because it's about a family that could be any of our families. There's a rebellious younger son – impatient, impetuous, unsure of himself. He squanders his father's inheritance and begs for mercy. Of course, there's also an older son – dutiful, responsible, and a little resentful when the father is quick to forgive. These are archetypes for a reason. We all know people like this, right? This is family systems at its best, and we see ourselves in the story.

Maybe you find yourself cheering for the younger son, who finally comes to his senses, who once was lost but then is found. Or maybe you sympathize with the older son, who just wants to be appreciated for his faithfulness. In the end, we learn that both of them are looking for the same thing – the father's love. And that's a hint that this story is not really about the sons. The sons only do what we expect; it's the father who surprises us. His son ran away from home and lost half his wealth. Imagine what the townsfolk were saying. The father might be glad to have him home, but run out to meet him? Throw a party in his honor? That's a bit of a stretch.

And notice that the father extends forgiveness before the son even says a word. While he's far off, still planning his apology, the father runs to him with open arms. It's an expression of grace freely given. It's a portrait of unconditional love.

The word prodigal means excessive, lavish, reckless. Traditionally it refers to the younger son and his wasteful spending. But it's really the father who is prodigal. It's the father who is reckless – not with money but with love. This is good news for those who are lost, for those in need of mercy, for those on the outside looking in. It's good news because God sees them and loves them. We know that, not just because of this story, but because that's how Jesus lived. Remember where we started: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!" He may as well have been running down the road, with open arms.

The truth is, we are all lost at different times and in different ways. Sometimes we're lost in the far country, trying to find ourselves amidst the struggles of life. Sometimes we're lost in our sense of duty, wearied by the weight of responsibility. Sometimes we're lost in anger or grief, in the brokenness of families or communities torn apart. We are all lost in our own ways, and the good news of this gospel is that God does not leave us there. God loves us with God's whole heart, and God looks for us, waits for us, always ready to run to us and welcome us home. The banquet is ready, and we all have a seat at the table. Thank God for such a scandalous love. Amen.