

## Prodigal son – searching for answers

I woke up the other day, thinking about the upcoming musical, especially because many of First Lutheran kids are performing in it.

We are so lucky to have such talented adults, teens, and children, in our congregation. And not just in music—technology, arts, business—and so much more. All gifts of the Holy Spirit. How blessed we are as a congregation.

I thought also about some of them graduating this year, and how different it was for students during the pandemic. We all leave home at some point in our lives and wonder what the future will bring. Theirs will very probably be very different than ours. It's a big change no matter what. Have we helped prepare them for the world and the questions they will face?

It reminded me of my own journey and faith walk. One memory especially stands out. During one of our youth group sessions, I asked a question about the church and was told “you don't ask. just believe”.

That made me angry. I was never questioning God. I just wanted to understand why we did certain things in the church. I still search for answers.

As I pondered what to say about questioning and preparing our young people for the world, I realized that last week's sermon might need to be revisited. The Prodigal Son. Let me retell it.

Like many of our own children, the son in the parable expressed an *unexpected* desire to leave home. This father must have bitten his lip as he gave his naive young adult his portion of the savings the family had sacrificed to accumulate.

With a comfortable bank account, the son defiantly moved far away and quickly spent the money in a lifestyle unlike anything he had experienced growing up. Although it doesn't say, I'm sure he had some friends that

also helped him enjoy his inheritance. Eventually it was gone, his so-called friends abandoned him and he found himself at a low point and broke. He had to resort to shameful work to survive.

Somewhere in the middle of the mess, he decided to go back home and humbly ask to be put on his father's payroll as hired help. Ever expectant, his father spotted his worn-down son on the horizon one day, hobbling toward home.

The forgiving father ran to him, swept him up, and celebrated his child's return.

So what are some of the lessons we can learn from this parable that relates to our own children as well as to ourselves?

### **1. Don't Discount Your Roots**

Just because they're in familiar ground, doesn't mean they're not valuable. It's okay to leave home but never pull up those roots if you can help it. They are meant to sturdy you in the storms of life.

### **2. Friends Mold Your Character**

Who you invest your time with tends to determine who you become. Making true friends is gradual process, but it is powerful. Choose each friend intentionally and wisely. Maybe a good friend would have helped the prodigal son make better choices.

### **3. Choices Have Consequences**

Grace saves your soul, but it doesn't shield you from the consequences of your actions. Sometimes the consequence is immediate, sometimes it's delayed, and sometimes it falls on innocent bystanders. But in the real world, I guarantee that the someone somewhere will be hurt.

### **4. Admitting a Mistake Can Be Heroic**

While it may be the most difficult, it may also be the single best thing you ever do. Facing our failures is hard for anyone, but we have God's grace to help us through. And asking for help isn't a sign of weakness, so don't forget to pray.

## 5. Your Low Point May Be a High Point

Sometimes you can't see where you need to be until you're looking up from rock bottom. That's where the prodigal son was when he decided to come home. Often, life's truths become clearer when circumstances can't get any worse.

Many of you parents may have had a rebellious child. Ours is named Andrea. We all know how hard it is to let our children make their own mistakes. We pray they will choose wisely.

Andrea went to Kansas City Art Institute, several hours away. She dropped out of school at the end of her junior year and tried to make her own way in the world.

I was pretty sure she had become an alcoholic and was probably in more trouble than we knew. We were far away and had to put her in God's hands.

But, just as the father with the prodigal son, letting her figure it out on her own was a risky kind of grace. Through a friend she started AA and has been sober now for 17 years.

What a blessing that friend had by being there for her! She didn't lecture or nag her. She just let Andrea know that she knew she was hurting and wanted to show her love and acceptance by being there for her. Since then, we have learned how far down she had gone in her illness. Just like the prodigal son. But, just like God, we were always there for her, as much as we could be. Waiting. And just like the father, we rejoice every day for her recovery.

And here is the blessing she and her family have become. Incidentally, her husband Dave is also celebrating 17 years of sobriety.

## **6. No One Can Mess Up God's Purposes**

Especially after you've made a mistake, it's easy to believe you have ruined everything, but God's love is always there. You can't make God stop loving you, no matter what.

## **7. Difficult Days Don't Have to Define You**

Tough experiences change your life, but they don't have to be in **charge** of your life. Whether from your own mistakes or from things beyond your control, the troubles of life will threaten to swallow your worth. You have to be strong enough to not let them.

## **8. It Takes Courage to Start Again**

Most of the time, just ignoring the problem is the easiest thing to do. Breaking away for a new beginning will never be easy.

## **9. Your Experience is Not Wasted**

When you've reached the point in your story where "home" is your last resort, sometimes you're right where God wants you to be, just as with the prodigal son. He's always done His best work in messy storylines.

## **10. Parents Wait Expectantly, just like the Prodigal Father**

As parents, we never stop checking our texts, emails, mailbox, or driveway, hoping to see you. As deep as you get into your new, independent life, we will always have a door open and a room ready. Your parents don't really let go. They will always keep you in their thoughts and prayers.

## 11. Forgiveness is Never Off the Table

Regardless of the offense or the time that has passed, forgiveness is always a possibility. It has no load limit and no expiration date. And love gets the last say. You are worth it, no matter what.

## 15. It's OK to Ask Questions

Thinking more deeply about important issues and asking questions is a good thing, even if the questions concern God or the church or the bible! Although it can be a worrisome time as parents grapple with their son or daughter's doubts, it is also a time to celebrate their autonomy, thinking skills and desire to personalize their faith.

All these points are not just for us as parents and those involved with young people. They are for us as adults as well.

In the story of the prodigal son, which son we relate to may change depending on where we are in our Christian journey. At times, we may be seeking God in earnest and relate to the older son. Other times, we may have let the priorities of the world come between us and God and we may relate more to the prodigal son. In any case, the parable speaks to all of us, no matter our perspective

The Story of the Prodigal son is about our faith walk looking at our relationship to God and to one another. We pray for our children, teens and each other as we realize that it's the story for all of us as we continually struggle to walk toward Home. **AMEN**