

March 31, 2019  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent  
Joshua 5:9-12  
Psalm 32  
2 Corinthians 5:16-21  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

## ***Road Trips & Regrets***

By the Rev. Tom Garrison

Do you remember a time when you were a teenager or young adult where you were still dependent on your parents financially? Did you long to break free, to strike out on your own, to make your own way in the world?

A couple of weekends ago I was reminded of such a time when Mary and I saw a really cool, fully restored, 1967 VW Fastback at the Minneapolis Auto Show.<sup>i</sup> The car on display—a Type III—was much nicer than the '69 Fastback my parents let me have when I went off to graduate school at Colorado State in 1977. But it was transportation, and it was free, except for gas, and I had “my own” set of wheels for the first time.<sup>ii</sup>

I had a graduate teaching fellowship in Speech, so I had just enough money coming in to pay for the R&Rs—rent and ramen soup. Then two things occurred which reminded me of my *dependence* rather than independence:

- First, I bounced a check to my own mother to reimburse her for the long-distance telephone charges on “my” landline phone.
- Then, while trying to drive from Colorado to my parent’s home in Lincoln, Nebraska during break, the VW Fastback broke down just across the state line, somewhere shy of Ogallala.

I had no credit card or cash for a mechanic. I was embarrassed and mad and full of self-pity that I had to call my father for help—again. He had to not only come get me on the other part of the state, but to take me back to Ogallala again and pay for the repairs when they were done. And it’s partly through that lens that I reread the parable of the Prodigal Son again this week.

I also came across the story of a young mother who was telling her 4-year-old son a nightly Bible story at bedtime. It was the story of the prodigal son who had taken his inheritance early, left and spent it all on living it up and partying until he had no money left and had to work on a pig farm where he couldn’t even afford to eat what the pigs ate. He came to his senses and decided to go back home and ask his dad for a job and forgiveness. I’ll leave off the ending of the story for now—because we’ll talk more about that—but when the mother finished reading, she asked her son what he had learned. He immediately said, “Never leave home without your credit card!” (Capitol One would be proud; their advertising works, even on a four-year old.)

This week I encourage you to read all the 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Luke, which is shortened up today to tell us about the tale of two sons, Yet, there are actually three parables related in quick succession, one having to do with a lost sheep, and another about a woman’s lost coin. All

three stories tell of ways people can be lost, out of ignorance, out of carelessness, out of rebellion—out of their own stubborn choices.

This Lent, how can we hear this old familiar prodigal story in perhaps some new ways? Author and pastor Brian McLaren says, “this short parable is one of the best mirrors of humanity ever composed.” Why does he say that?<sup>iii</sup>

Well, first, my graduate school training causes me to ask, “Who was the audience?”<sup>iv</sup> You might think it was the sinners and tax collectors, but Jesus’ intended audience, the people he was really trying to speak to—to get through to—were the Pharisees and scribes. The Pharisees were said to be pious, precise and religiously knowledgeable. They maintained a close relationship with the scribes or religious scholars. Today, McLaren says, we might call them hyper-orthodox or fundamentalists, but back then, most would consider them pure and faithful people. They thought they were the holy ones—a holiness obtained by strictly adhering to all of Moses’ commands, but along comes Jesus lecturing them that basic human kindness and compassion are more important *and* absolute than religious rules and laws.<sup>v</sup>

They didn’t like the messenger—after all he was dining with people whom they considered unclean. He was welcoming people they considered not just sinners, but inferior to themselves. I want to be very clear here. Too often these passages are used, even today, to vilify and mistreat all Jews, rather than seeing the Pharisees as they saw themselves—a small, religiously-entitled class.<sup>vi</sup> They missed the point that if Jesus truly is and was God’s son, then as columnist Ronnie McBrayer puts it, their self-righteousness puts even God on shaky ground for it appears that God’s standards are lower than the establishment’s.<sup>vii</sup>

The joke is on them, McBrayer says, because those who feel so offended by the wrongdoers and foreigners, strangers and “sinners” simply don’t get it. But we don’t get it either. Christianity would do well—it would do better—to not be so judgmental about the rules, and simply lead with love.

Lenten lesson # two is to recall that the tale of the younger son is initially a reverse story of one going from “riches to rags,” as one writer put it. Remember that independent self of yours? We all think we can make it on our own. I don’t need your help, thank you very much. But we are loved, we are forgiven, we make it in this world in spite of—not because of—ourselves.<sup>viii</sup>

What happens when we finally wake up and realize we have wasted our time and our gifts pursuing things that ultimately seem empty and unimportant? That’s lesson #2, to admit that we are not, or shouldn’t be, the center of our own universe.

And what does the Father in the story do? What did my own Dad do when I called for help? What does God our Creator do when we finally turn and admit we need help, we cannot do it all on our own? That’s lesson #3. God comes running to us. The lost son is welcomed home in

joy and thanksgiving. When all is said and done, God understands, God forgives, and God welcomes us home, no matter how dark a place we are in.

Now scholars tell us that in the first century, a Middle Eastern man never, ever ran because if he did, he would have to hitch up his tunic showing his bare legs. In that culture, it was humiliating and shameful for a man to show his bare legs.

In an article called “*12 Things You Didn’t Know About the Prodigal Son,*” theology Professor Matt Williams suggests another reason the father ran to the son, because it was traditional if a son squandered his inheritance among Gentiles to then perform a ceremony, called the **kezazah**. They would break a large pot in front of him and yell, ‘You are now cut off from your people!’ and the community would totally reject him. So, the father in our tale might have wanted to get to the son first, running to the reunion to make clear there would be no rejecting *his* son.<sup>ix</sup>

That may be true, but I think it misses the point of this wonderful metaphor of running. McLaren says the reason he likes this story so much is that it is “one of the best windows into God’s gracious and spacious heart where all are welcome at the table”—even the older brother, the supposedly responsible one, who is angry and remains *outside* the welcome home celebration.<sup>x</sup>

Are we any different?

- Have you ever resented the rule breakers, the independent-minded folks who go their separate way?
- Do you resent the long-absent one who blows back into town for a few hours of face-time, and then is gone again?

That can happen to us as aging parents too. We get resentful. What’s the old saying, we raise kids to be independent and then they are—what’s up with that?

Well that older brother was angry. I’m guessing he had nursed his resentments for a long time, *or* maybe he wished he had gone away too. Well, we rule keepers can get angry when someone who has fallen off the path is restored to it and seems to get more attention than those who have tried to stay on the path all along. We tend to think *someone else* squandered their chance or wasted their opportunity and should not be given another one. In trying to exclude someone else we place ourselves outside the tent. We fail to see our own spiritual homelessness, our own bankrupt belief.

Professor Emeritus Justo Gonzalez puts it this way:

In Lent it would be good for us to listen to the parable of the two sons while moving back and forth between seeing ourselves as the lost son who is received with open arms and the obedient one who apparently thinks he is more deserving . . . Consider both the grace of God that has sought and welcomed us, [AND] the constant danger that religious people face—thinking that we are better” than others; that we are not lost.<sup>xi</sup>

That line hit me right between the eyes, this week, for you see I was the rules-follower growing up who resented the many times my parents tried to help my rule-breaking brother. My parents were filled with compassion, as is *God* who wants us to come inside, to be welcomed at the table and to celebrate—truly celebrate—Holy Communion and reunion with Him.

**Amen.**

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<sup>i</sup> Totally rebuilt 1967 VW Fastback, Type III at the Minneapolis Auto Show, 2019.



<sup>ii</sup> Reasonable facsimile of the color and make of the 1969 VW Fastback I drove. I called the car, “Hypotenuse,” which is the longest side of a right triangle, but not, as it proved, to be the shortest distance between two points. The Fastback is the same car I referred to in another sermon as dying right in the middle of a Fort Collins parade on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.



<sup>iii</sup> Pastor Brian D. McLaren, a leader in missional theology, and author of *We Make The Road by Walking*, Jericho Books, 2014, page 260. In 2010, McLaren received a second honorary doctorate from Virginia Theological Seminary (Episcopal) and is an advocate for “‘a new kind of Christianity’ – just, generous, and working with people of all faiths for the common good.”

<sup>iv</sup> I received an M.A. in Rhetorical Criticism, which is the study of speeches. That discipline teaches one to analyze not just who the intended audience was of a communication, but also the “rhetorical situation,” or what was going on at that particular time that the speaker chose to address. That will have to be a topic for another time.

<sup>v</sup> McLaren, pages 108-109.

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<sup>vi</sup> “Vilify and mistreat” are McLaren’s words. The clarification as to the size of this religious sect is my own.

<sup>vii</sup> Syndicated columnist Ronnie McBrayer, <https://ronniemcbrayer.org/2016/06/26/the-jokes-on-us/> McBrayer, describes himself as “more agnostic than certain, but I keep ‘kicking at the darkness,’ and ‘learning the unforced rhythms of grace.’”

<sup>viii</sup> Gordon Dasher, Church of Christ, 1989, <http://www.theexaminer.org/volume4/number6/lessons.htm>

<sup>ix</sup> Matt Williams, Biola’s Talbot School of Theology, quoting the work of Kenneth Bailey, author of *The Cross & the Prodigal*. First saw his commentary about the Kezazah ceremony and 1st Century Middle Eastern men not running in “*The Prodigal Son: 12 Things You Didn’t Know*,” [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com)

<sup>x</sup> McLaren, page 109.

<sup>xi</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, professor emeritus of historical theology, Candler School of Theology, *Christian Century* magazine, March 13, 2019, p. 18.