

EXTRAVAGANCE

SHERARD EDINGTON

Genesis 18:1-15

The parable of the prodigal son is probably one of the best known of Jesus' parables. We find it in the Gospel of Luke. What makes this parable so interesting is that there are so many ways to approach it. Every time you turn it something new pops out. The story is about the second son of a wealthy man. The son demands that he give be given his share of the inheritance even though his father is not dead. The father complies and the son takes his windfall and heads to foreign lands where he lives a wild and indulgent life. Eventually his money runs out and he is forced to find work. He ends up with a job feeding pigs. His sub-subsistence wages barely keep him alive and he realizes that the pigs eat better than he does. He makes up his mind to return home and seek a job as a servant for his father. At least then he would have three meals and a place to sleep. As he nears his home his father spots him on the horizon and runs out to meet him. The father kisses his son. He calls for a robe to be brought to him; a ring is placed on his finger (which marks him as a member of the family); sandals are placed on his feet. The father for the fatted calf to be slaughtered and they have a party.

One of the motifs that I find in this parable is extravagance. The son makes the extravagant demand for his inheritance which he wastes on extravagant living. The father is extravagant in his response to his son's return giving him fine clothes and a banquet. How many of us, when we read this, think to ourselves, "That kid needs to be taught a lesson. Let him be a servant. He can work his way back into the family." But that is not what happens. Remember, this is a story told by Jesus to teach us of God's extravagant love for us, to teach us that God will go to any lengths to bring us back.

Our reading today comes from the beginning of our scripture—the 18th chapter of Genesis. Genesis begins with the accounts of creation, the sin of the first people, the flood, and the story about a tower in Babel. We call this the prehistory. Then we are introduced to Sarah and Abraham—two people called by God to go to a new land. God's covenant with Sarah and Abraham is that God will give them God's blessing, a great name, and numerous descendants who would become a great nation. At one point God says to them, *Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.* (15:5)

In today's passage, Abraham is close to 100 years old. Sarah is about 90. Together they have not had any children, although by now Abraham has had a son with Hagar, his wife's servant. That son is Ishmael. God's promise of descendants as numerous as the uncountable stars seems bit thin at this point. Sarah is, as the scripture puts it, *advanced in age* and beyond *the manner of women*.

Abraham and Sarah have been residing in Hebron, at a place called *the oaks of Mamre*. It is afternoon and Abraham is sitting at the entrance of his tent. In another time and place he might be sitting on the front porch drinking an iced tea. I imagine he nods off because when he looks up he sees three men standing before him. He runs from his tent to greet them. The tradition of the culture of that day dictated that one should always exercise hospitality to travelers—food, water, shelter, and protection.

Abraham runs to the men and bows before them. He says to them, *My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.* Abraham offers them some water and the opportunity to freshen up. While they are waiting they can rest in the shade of the trees.

But notice what Abraham does. He goes far beyond his offer of water and rest. He finds his wife and asks her to make bread using the *choice flour*. He goes to where his herd is grazing, selects a choice calf and instructs his servant to slaughter it for the meal. When the food is ready, Abraham gathers the bread and the meat plus milk and curds and brings it to the men. While the men eat, Abraham stands by as a servant might.

Abraham's actions are extravagant. He goes far beyond what is required—far beyond bread and water. The strangers receive a feast.

As readers of the story, we already have an idea of who the men are. We are told at the beginning that God appears to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. These men may be God. At the very least, they are angels. I am certain that Abraham does not know this. He sees three men and he responds with generosity.

After the meal, the men ask Abraham where his wife is. Abraham indicates that she is in the tent. One of the men says, *I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.* Sarah is inside the tent at the door listening to this conversation. She hears the men say that she is going to have a son and she does what any 90-year-old woman would do. She laughs.

It is God, though that has the last laugh, because Sarah does have a son. They name him Isaac, which in Hebrew sounds very much like the word laughter.

One of the things that I see in this story is extravagance. In fact, the entirety of the Abraham stories is about extravagance. God calls Abraham and Sarah with an extravagant offer of blessings—you will be great, your name will be great, your descendants will be great. God honors the promise. God is extravagant. Throughout scripture we witness moment after moment of extravagant behavior by God. And I don't mean wasteful or frivolous or irresponsible, but extravagant over-the-top,

super-sized, more than is required. I'm talking about the kind of extravagance that makes us laugh, not laughing at God's silliness, but at the joy that God brings to our lives.

The very act of creation itself is extravagant. When the human creatures sin, God takes extraordinary steps to turn them around. Over and over, God does things that we just don't expect a God to do. Finally, in an extravagant act of humility, God comes to us as one of us to further teach and direct and lead us back.

Our lives should reflect this extravagance. In our dealings with others and in our faith, we should give more than is expected. What if we were truly extravagant? I imagine that your first reaction is to object and point out that you would quickly go broke. "If I give away everything, I would soon have nothing." But no one is saying to give away everything, just that we should do more than we are expected. Be generous. Too often we do the math and determine the very least we can contribute and still fulfill our obligations. Sometimes we are just cheap. The English language has some wonderfully expressive words to describe cheapness: skinflint, tight-fisted, miser, tightwad, penny pincher, spendthrift, stingy, wastrel, scrounger, freeloader, moneygrubber, and more.

My favorite description of someone who lacks generosity has to be how Charles Dickens describes Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

Do these words like this describe your faith? Are you constantly doing the calculus to adjust what you owe God verses what God owes you?

For several years, our church has been involved with the Compassionate Hands program where during the winter we host homeless women. So many of you work hard and give generously to make this program possible. But, to be honest, this program is inefficient. Each week, more of you are volunteers than there are women we are hosting. Financially, we would probably do better just renting rooms at the Dix Motel across the street. But the program is called Compassionate Hands because it is about expressing Christian extravagance to those in need. The women we host are like the travelers who appeared to Abraham. Why can't we show extravagance to these travelers? In the New Testament, the book of Hebrews reflects on the Abraham story when we read where it says, *Do not neglect to show*

hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it (Heb 13:2).

But what if Abraham had not been so generous to the travelers, would they have blessed the couple? That is a moot question. Abraham was such a person to be generous. It was his nature. It was no doubt why God called him. Abraham was nearly 100 years old, and much of that had been lived in the disappointment that God's promise had not come to pass. If Abraham had been bitter and stingy who would have blamed him.

Think of a time when you were the recipient of unexpected generosity. How did it make you feel? Shouldn't we want to make all people feel that way?

As people of faith, we are called beyond generosity. We are called to be extravagant. I urge you to practice this in your relations and in your faith. Be extravagant. Make the world laugh with joy.