***“There Was a Man Who Had Two Sons …”***

*a sermon delivered by Rev. Scott Dalgarno on March 30, 2025*

*based on Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32*

Some of you know I write poetry as a side-gig. I’d written prose -- fiction and non-fiction for years but at around the age of 50 I realized the power of compression that makes poetry special and powerful. I was drawn more and more to poetry because in poetry, nothing is wasted. Every word counts, every line can stand alone as an important statement.

I prefer to read fiction and non-fiction where the author is spare and precise, too.

The upshot: as a reader, I’m not patient. If the author doesn’t give me something that grabs me in the first few sentences I tune out. It helps when the first line is a humdinger.

Often those are lines that don’t bother to begin in the beginning, they take you right to the beating heart of the narrative. Here are some first lines that work that way.

## Alice Walker’s, *The Color Purple* begins: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy.” There‘s a definite hook there.

The beginning of *Absalom, Absalom*, by William Faulkner creates a whole world:  “From a little after four o’clock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that—a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that sight and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler.”

The best ones are short. Here’s the opening of Zora Neal Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board.”

My favorite opening is by **Charles Bukowski. It’s also short:**  “The first thing I remember is being under something.” (Ham on Rye).

Sometimes the key to the whole narrative is right there in the very first line.

In today’s text, the parable we usually call, “The Prodigal Son,” the very first sentence of that parable is very important: “There was a man who had two sons.”

That first sentence is significant because it could have just as easily begun, “There was a man whose son did something unspeakable.” The first time I preached that text I was a total novice, on summer break from seminary. I preached at McKenzie River Presbyterian Church down in Walterville, outside of Eugene.

I delivered a whole sermon about the younger son. Anyway, I was sitting down after, and someone piped up with just the critique I needed and deserved.

She said, “What about the older brother?” I’d left him out completely and she noticed and she was right -- I hadn’t done right by the text. I’d taken twenty minutes and only preached half the sermon, and it was probably the wrong half.

In some ways, focusing on the young one is understandable. After all, he’s the flashy one, the one whose life is a fascinating scandal that grabs our attention. He’s the one, you remember, who asked his father for money, and then, as soon as he can get out the front door he lights out for a land far away.

Soon he’s lost any remnant of a moral compass he has left and wastes everything in self-indulgent living. In other words, this son became “prodigal” (meaning wasteful) and that’s why we call this “the Parable of the Prodigal Son,” as if it were a story only about this younger, reckless one.

In a movie version he'd have been played by James Dean in the 1950s, and since then by Brad Pitt, Kiefer Sutherland, Nicholas Cage, Will Smith; maybe Alexander Ludwig (no relation) to name a few bad boy types.

The prodigal son part of the story is appealing. It’s brutally honest about the kind of trouble that can happen in life. You know how it goes. The younger son leaves home, like so many of us when we’re young, seeking a new life, hopeful, oblivious, wrong-headed, wanting his freedom but unsure what to do with it. And then, out there, far away from home, things go south quickly.

The bright lights aren’t so bright as he thought, some friends turn out **not** to be true friends; one bit of debauchery leads to the another. He tumbles until he hits rock bottom – and there he is … far from home, broke, desperately hungry, not a friend to be found. “No one gave him anything,” Jesus says. (Luke 15:16)

So, ashamed and alone, he takes a job – the kind they save for undocumented workers. He’s paid under the table and probably with some pretty sketchy terms.

Anyway, he finally comes to his senses, faces up to the reality of his lousy choices, and heads back home. But he knows where he stands now. He intends to say to his father, “I blew it, Dad. I have betrayed you and the family name. I don’t expect to be treated as your son anymore. I’m no longer worth it. Treat me like a servant.”

But there is a stunning and humbling surprise in store for the younger son. His father sees him coming in the distance and doesn’t hesitate for a moment. Full of joy and compassion, his father runs down the road to meet his son, embraces him, kisses him on the neck.

He calls back to those in the house, “Bring a robe – the braided one – and bring a ring for my son and sandals. Prepare a feast and let the music begin! My son is home! My son who was dead is now alive again, my boy who was lost is found!”

Back in the far country, no one gave him anything. Now he comes home to a father who gives him everything.

It’s a story with interesting turns, and it might be our story, too. Maybe we haven’t hit bottom as hard as he did, but who among us has not experienced times when our life has unraveled, when we have made poor choices, when we have acted out of our worst instincts?

Who among us has not, at least once, longed for the mercy and restoration this story promises. We like the “Parable of the Prodigal Son.”

Unless, of course, we identify more with the other son in the story. As I pointed out, the parable begins: “There was a man who had *two* sons.”

The younger son had an older brother, a brother who did *not* leave the homestead; a brother who did not look for something flashy, and instead just worked the fields of the family farm. We pay less attention to this son because, frankly, he’s not as vulnerable and likeable.

He gets overlooked because he often comes across as a stick-in-the-mud, a sanctimonious jerk. He reminds us a little of the jealous and cruel stepsisters in the fairy tale, *Cinderella*.

What happens is that when his younger brother comes home and the music and dancing begin, this older brother is out on the back forty. When he hears the party going on in the house, and finds out that it’s happening because his despicable brother is back, he is furious; so angry he stays outside, won’t join the party.

Well, we might be tempted to let him just stay out there in the growing dark, but remember: “There was a man who had two sons.”

So, this man, this father, who earlier had gone down the road in love and compassion to welcome his younger son home, now goes back outside, this time with love and understanding for his other son.

But he runs into a buzzsaw. His older boy is enraged. “I have been here all along, Dad. I have cared for you. I’ve cared for the farm. Never once did I cross you. I did everything you asked me to do. But did you ever host a feast for me? No. And now this son of yours who blew everything has come home, and you’re serving barbequed rib.

It’s easy to think of this older brother as a resentful and a bit self-righteous. But this is unfair. We actually know this older brother. Some of us **are** this older brother, right? Most of us, probably.

He’s the one who stays home to take care of things and when the time comes round, his aging parents, too. And when his siblings call, asking how everyone is, they say, “I wish I could help you take care of Mom and Dad, but you know I live way down here in Manhattan Beach.”

He’s the one who balances his parents’ checkbook, who sits with them when their memories are fogged by dementia, who stays up through the night to care for them when they have Covid. And he is the one who, when everybody around him seems to be partying away without a care in the world, wants to know if any of his sacrifice counts.

He’s the one who cries out from the depths of his heart, “Dad, do I matter to you? Why has there never been a party for me?”

Every parent who has more than one child knows that you love them all, but true love demands that you love each child differently. One child is shy and withdrawn and needs confidence, while another is almost too eager for attention and needs something else.

One child is lonely and cries herself to sleep at night. Another child takes too many risks for her own good. Some children are carefree to the point of carelessness, while other children try so hard to be perfect that they can’t forgive themselves when they are not.

A mother’s love, a father’s love is not abstract. It’s love that seeks to know just who each child is, what each child requires, and then strives to give each child the kind of love, the kind of blessing, they require.

When the younger son in the parable came home ashamed and feeling unworthy even to enter the house, the father ran down the road to give his son the love he needed, the tender embrace of mercy.

To the older boy who won’t come near the house the father says, “Son, you wonder why there has been no party for you; well, there’s been a party going on for you your whole life long.

And now I want to give you something even more precious. Your brother. You feel the world is unfair? Here’s how we make the world fair. We offer your brother unmerited mercy, which makes unmerited mercy for you and me possible, too.”

It's the same speech Bishop Marianne Budde gave Donald Trump the second day of his second presidency. Without talking down to him, showing maximum respect, she showed him how he could begin to make the two halves of this divided country one again by offering mercy to those on the margins who are living in fear.

Well, as I said, every child requires a particular brand of love. My favorite short story is about that. It is titled, “I Stand Here Ironing.” It’s by the late Tillie Olsen.

Here’s the first sentence. Like the really good ones, it begins in the middle:

“I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron.”

Reading on we discover that the woman who is ironing is a single mother of five children abandoned by her husband. And now some authority figure – a teacher or a social worker – has asked this mother to come in to talk about one of her children, a daughter born just after the Great Depression, a child who this authority figure says “needs help.” So, the mother is ironing and thinking to herself about her troubled daughter as she irons …

*She was a child seldom smiled at. Her father left me before she was a year old. I had to work for her first six years when there was work…. She was dark and thin and foreign-looking in a world where the prestige went to blondeness and curly hair and dimples, she was slow where glibness was prized. She was a child of anxious, not proud, love. We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth. … She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear.*

And then, as the painful memories of her daughter’s life flood her, this mother, knowing deeply the kind of love her daughter needs, silently cries out in a form of prayer that we all pray, if not to God, to the universe …

*[H]elp her to know – help make it so there is cause for her to know – that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron.*

Mercy. It’s the name of the hospital my grandmother died in in 1955. It’s the unanswered appeal Bishop Budde made to Donald Trump. It’s the word, the call, the prayer that this year, 2025, is all about because every single day, now, some new cruel order is coming down from on high aimed at the hearts of the poorest and most powerless among us.

It’s what those of us who are prodigal need, and also what those of us who are angry and resentful may need even more. Yes, and even those among us who hold all the power.

Mercy. If we, all of us, only knew how much.

Amen

Tillie Olsen, “I Stand Here Ironing” in *Tell Me a Riddle* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1961

This sermon owes a debt to Dr. Tom Long and his sermon on “Day 1”