

Fourth Sunday Lent Cycle C 2019
Prodigal Son

For years I have been on the lookout for a really good modern day telling of the Prodigal Son, and this last week I finally found one. For the last few days this modern day parable has had a profound impact on me. I hope and pray it has the same deep meaning for you.

A Modern Day Parable (details are fictional)

Jenny grew up in Newcastle Australia. In her early teenage years she fell into a pattern of battles with her parents. They didn't react too well when she came home with a nose ring and tattoos. They were furious when she stayed out all night without so much as a phone call to tell them where she was. Her friends weren't exactly her parent's first choice.

One night Jenny and her folks have a huge fight. "I hate you!" she screams at them as she slams the door to her bedroom. That night she acts on a plan that's been forming for some time. Once everyone has gone to sleep she gets dressed, packs a bag and goes into the kitchen. Opening the kitchen drawers she takes her parents credit cards, cash, and bank book. She hops on the train and heads for Sydney. When she gets there she waits on the doorstep of the Bank so she can be the first through the door. She forges her mother's signature and withdraws the \$30000 her parents had in their account. She grabs a cab to the airport and uses Dad's credit card to buy a ticket to Melbourne.

She arrives in Melbourne and pretty soon she's enjoying the high life – a new group of friends, plenty of booze and drugs, late nights, sleeping all day, no school, no parents hassling her. It doesn't take long until the money's gone and the credit cards have been cancelled.

Back home her parent's are frantic. Mom's taken a second job at night to pay off the credit card debt, and their \$30000 of savings is gone. The police are notified, the streets are searched – Her parents don't know what's happened. They fear the worst.

Meanwhile on the streets of Melbourne things aren't going too well. Jenny's soon addicted to heroin and the money is gone. She moves into brothel and starts a life of prostitution.

One day she's walking down the street and sees a poster on a telephone pole. "Have you seen this girl?" with a photo of her. The poster's got her parent's phone number on it, and asks for anyone with information to call. Jenny rips the poster down, folds it up and puts it into her pocket.

The months pass, then the years. Jenny's careless one too many times. At first she writes off her sickness as just another bout of flu. But the illness persists. She goes to the free clinic to discover she's contracted Hepatitis C and HIV. Not even the brothel customers want anything to do with her.

As she sits lonely, tired and hungry, she looks at the poster from that telephone pole. She thinks back to her previous life – as a typical schoolgirl in a middle class family. It triggers memories of a family water fight one hot summer day when she was 12, of crazy moments dancing together, fun meals together, and of her sister's comforting arms when she broke up with a boyfriend. "God, why did I leave?" she says to herself. "Even the family dog lives a better life than I do." She's sobbing now, and knows that more than anything she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, "Mom, dad, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a train up to Newcastle. I'll be at Newcastle station about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well I guess I'll just stay on the train."

The next day on the train Jenny thinks about all the flaws in her plan. What if mom and dad missed the message? What are they going to do if they heard the message? After all, it's been 10 years and they haven't heard a word from me. How are they going to react when they discover I'm a junkie with AIDS?

If they do show up what on earth am I going to say?..."

The train pulls into Newcastle station. She hears the hiss of the brakes as the train comes to a stop. Her heart starts pounding. “This is it.”

Jenny steps out of the train not knowing what to expect. She looks to her right and sees an empty platform, but before she can look to the left she hears someone call her name. Her head whips around and there’s her mom and dad and her sister and her aunts and uncles and cousins and grandmother. They’re holding a banner that reads “Welcome home”, and there’s her mom and dad running towards her, tears streaming down their face, arms held wide. Jenny can’t move. Her parent’s grab her with such force it almost knocks her over.

She starts to say “Dad, I’m sorry. ...”

“Hush child. Forget the apologies. All we care about is that you’re home. I just want to hold you. Come on, everyone’s waiting – we’ve got a big party organised at home.” And Jenny finds herself awash in a sea of family and love that she has not known for over 10 years.

Jesus in our gospel today shows us two possible responses to the pain and hurt of fractured relationships.

There’s the father’s response of lavish and unconditional love and forgiveness.

Or

There is the second son’s response of bitterness, resentment, division, and anger.

As disciples of Jesus our path is clear:

We are to be like the Father who’s only response is compassion and Love.

- Adapted from: <https://storiesforpreaching.com/a-modern-prodigal/>