

## Travel Stories: *The Rascal* - wk 7

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presbyterian Church of Newton, KS - Aug. 30, 2020  
Luke 16:1-9 *The Message paraphrase* - (Adapted from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*)

As we continue with another of Jesus' stories while walking through Samaria, I'll be drawing from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell It Slant* and reading from his *Message paraphrase* of the Bible to help us capture some of what's happening in this story.

Eugene Peterson, if you don't know who he is, could probably be described as Jesus' grandpa. He speaks, reads, and writes Hebrew and Greek, as Jesus' grandpas would have. He has a white beard, as Jesus' grandpas probably had. He deeply loves Jesus, as Jesus' grandpas would have loved their grandson. Eugene Peterson is also a pastor, and a scholar, and an author. An author worth reading.

Let's quickly review some of Jesus' earlier Travel Stories: The first parable, *The Neighbor*, creates neighbors of us all. It's the *Good Samaritan* story and we find a good neighbor, where we didn't expect to find one. Life following Jesus is an act of becoming a neighbor to those we hadn't thought God wanted us to care about.

The second parable, *The Friend*, prevents us from developing a special vocabulary and grammar for speaking with God that is different from the language we use in speaking with one another. Prayer, both speaking

and listening to God, is no more “spiritual” than the words and listening we employ to get along in the world and with one another. The way we talk in the company of Jesus is no different than the way we talk in the company of our friends. Prayer is about relationship with God and it uses all the words and listening we use in normal relationships.

The third parable, The Barn Builder, is a whistle-blowing story - a story that stops us from using high-minded theories and discussions as a way of covering or hiding our sins. It cuts through our strategic words and tells us to quit the sin. The man asked for justice to receive his inheritance and Jesus discerned that the man’s real issue was coveting, not being ripped off by his brother.

And last week we considered Jesus’ story of the lost brothers - the prodigal and his brother - this story ranks near the top of all-time favorites, told and retold down the generations. It is a story that encourages us to stop the self-examination and start joining the celebration. All are welcome in the Father’s home.

Now if the Prodigal story is the most popular, today’s story probably takes the prize for being the most ignored - or if not just ignored, it’s dismissed outright. But its unpopularity provides it a certain distinction that gets our attention. How’s this for an opener: *Who wants to read Jesus’ least popular parable?*

Many scholars, though not all, have trouble with this story. Rudolf Bultmann declared the parable to be incomprehensible. Maybe so, maybe not. Let's take a look, because it certainly is odd. Yet before we look at the story, I want us to look at some of the words in the story. Eugene Peterson helps us with this.

First, the word "prudence" in verse 8. Here is how a few translations translate the word. "**The master commended the man for his *prudence***" (RSV); the manager "**acted shrewdly**" (NRSV and NIV), "**had done wisely**" (AV), "**knew how to look after himself**" (MSG). The Greek word is *phronimos*; the Hebrew word is *chokmah*. The Greek and Hebrew words are commonly translated as "wise." They talk about the good and moral life, but in English they tend to kinda collect an air of stodginess about them, don't they? They are sober words, serious words. They're not attractable qualities. Eugene Peterson writes that, "*Novelists always have a much more difficult time making a good person attractive and interesting than they do a scoundrel...*"

Jesus' story of the rascal interestingly uses these dull words to describe the rascal. He's prudent. He's cautious, playing it safe, not rocking the boat. And as we recount his story throughout history, he escapes the label of self-serving and calculating for himself and is now in the huge world of God's generosity. The generous action of God defines his life.

The story in it's setting in Luke follows the Prodigal son story. At first reading the two stories seem to come from different worlds. The story of the lost brothers and their patient and compassionate father touches emotions deep within us. A father with two sons, both of whom treat him wretchedly. The younger son does so in a calloused, cruel betrayal, the elder in a cold, crusty, rigid, standoffish self-righteousness. The father receives them both in a compassionate, all-embracing, reconciling welcome. We love this story. We can't get enough of it. But the second story evokes in us none of this emotion, this heart-wrenching, familial love.

Nevertheless there are striking similarities in the two stories. In Luke 15 the son throws himself on the mercy of his father. In Luke 16 the manager throws himself on the mercy of his master. Both son and manager are in desperate straits and have nothing to show for themselves except their wasted and misspent lives. One has made a mess of being a son; the other has made a mess of being a manager.

Both son and manager betray a trust. The core identity of each has been squandered and they have nothing to show for it. Neither prodigal nor rascal offers an excuse. No rationalization, no extenuating circumstance, nothing.

The son and the manager both experience "amazing grace." The son is not banned from the family. The manager is not jailed. They do not reap what they sowed.

They do not get what they deserve. After a lifetime of doing it wrong, they finally get it right. The son gets an extravagant party from his father. The manager gets a surprising commendation from his boss. And in both stories there is no proper “ending.”

We are not told what the elder brother does. We are not told what happens to the manager. The missing ending clamors for an ending, a resolution. We the readers, the listeners, are pulled into participation in a world of grace. What do we do? Well, we don't do anything. It's not what we expect from having wronged a parent or boss, and it's not what we expect from a religious teacher.

The stories leave us not with an agenda to do something to make up for whatever we have done wrong, but with an invitation to receive everything from God who wills our wholeness and our well-being. But have we noticed we need some grace from God, or have we become “good” at this God thing and more apt to pat ourselves on the back for praying well or regular worship attendance?

“The rascal” in the story emerges as a metaphor for the surprising improbability of grace. While the story is at risk of looking like Jesus is commending a clever crook, it is more fully a story of embracing salvation, the kind of story that is at the very core of Jesus' good news.