

The Third Son in the Story of the Prodigal Son

Sermon by Rev. Dr. J. Mark Lewis – Lake Joseph Community Church, June 26, 2022

Perhaps some of you enjoy reading books by Ken Follet. He wrote Pillars of the Earth, Fall of Giants, World Without End, Pillar of Fire, and many other epic stories. I apologize on behalf of all Welsh people for the length of Ken Follet's books...we are sometimes long-winded! Apart from writing those amazing historical dramas, Ken Follet has also written some great mysteries. One of my favorites is the story that starts with an ordinary man accused of murder. The reader is upset because this main character is a likable guy, and we don't want to think that he is a murderer. Then comes a great Ken Follet twist, the man finds out that he was part of a weird genetic experiment, and...he has an evil twin! I often use this defense when someone accuses me of wrongdoing. Now suspicion shifts to the evil twin, and the reader is relieved that the nice guy is innocent. But here comes the next twist...the evil twin has an iron-clad alibi, and...suspicion shifts back to the protagonist, so heartbreaking. Then comes the next twist, the two men are not twins...they are triplets...and the third brother is way worse than even the evil second brother! I suppose, I should have guessed, since the title of the book is, *The Third Twin!*" This sermon is inspired by that book. And I can see you guys whispering at the back, saying, "Dear God, don't let this sermon be as long as Pillars of the Earth!"

In the story of the prodigal son, a father has two sons. The younger son demands his share of the estate immediately, and the father concedes. The younger son then leaves for a far country where he squanders his share on wild living. When famine reaches the other country, the younger son, finding himself destitute, takes a job feeding slop to pigs. The younger son feels regret for what he has done and resolves to return home and beg his father to take him back, not as a son, but as a servant. He returns home, fully prepared to prostrate himself and seek a scrap of mercy from his father. The father, seeing him from a distance, is overjoyed, runs to greet the prodigal, showers him with love, gives him a ring, a robe, and sandals, all signs of the full restoration as a son, and then kills the fatted calf to host a gala celebration for the returned prodigal. It's a wonderful story of how God greets people who have left the church and want to come back. There is no judgment, no punishment, no relegation to second class, only love, acceptance, and full restoration. The twist in the story comes in the form of the reaction of the elder son, a diligent and hard-working man who is angered that his father has lavished such love on his good-for-nothing brother. He refuses to come in for the party. The story ends with the father saying to the elder son "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

It is a wonderful story of how God receives anyone who has strayed and wants to come home. The two sons represent two groups of people. The elder son is all the people who were born and raised in the church and have stayed in the church. The younger son is all the people who were born and raised in the church, then left the church, and then wanted to come back to church. We don't know how the story ended. I hope the elder son changed. I hope he said,

“Wow, dad, I never thought of it like that, my brother has returned home, I am filled with joy, let’s get on with the party.” It’s a solid, simple story of how we should greet the prodigals who want to come back.

But I say there is another son! I say there was a third son in the story of the prodigal son! I know you are thinking, “Hold on there Mark! I’ve read that story! I know my Bible! I’m a serious Presbyterian (Baptist, Anglican, Pentecostal...just fill in your denomination here). There were only two sons. What are you trying to pull here?” Well, give me a chance, indulge me for a couple of minutes, and then make your judgment!”

I propose that the father and mother had another son. The elder son in this story is not the oldest son. There was a son born before him, but he was born during the time of a brutal war with a far stronger neighbouring nation. That first-born son was captured by the invading army and taken away. The mom and dad had no idea what happened to him. They only knew that they were helpless against the invading army, so they assumed that their baby had been killed, and they resolved to get on with their lives in the best way they were able. They had another son, the elder son of this story, and then another son, the prodigal son, and they were thankful to be blessed with two sons. They would always grieve the death of their first-born son, but they lived with thanks for the two boys they had.

But, here’s my Ken Follet twist, the first son was not dead. He had been taken away, raised in a foreign land, and used as a slave. His life had been miserable, but he had never known anything but slavery, so it never occurred to him that there was something better. Then one day he met an older man who came from his own country of origin. The older man recognized his face and knew the story of his birth and capture. He approaches the first-born boy and says, “Do you know who you are?” The young man is puzzled and says, “Yes, I am a slave, I have always been a slave.” And the older man replies, “You are no slave. You were born a free man. I know your father and mother; I know the farm where they still live. I can tell you how to get there.”

The old man’s story makes sense, and the young man is intrigued. He has never had any reason to want to escape, but now with the idea that he is not doomed to be a slave, and perhaps has a family somewhere, he plots his escape. He leaves the foreign land, and after walking for many days, finds himself at the end of the pathway leading up to the farm in the place that the old man has described. He stands for a while, taking in the scene, the vineyards, the olive groves, the fields of grain. It is too beautiful, it is too much, there is no way that he belongs here. But he hears the old man’s voice from the foreign land now so far behind him, “I know your father and mother, I know where they live, I can tell you how to get there.” And he begins to walk up the lane.

The father has been working in the olive grove closest to the house, but now he sees a stranger walking toward his home, and he goes on alert. The stranger is a rough-looking man, dirty and unkempt, his hair is wild and his beard is tangled. He is no neighbour, he is no local villager, everything about him says, “danger.” The father picks up a winnowing fork and begins to walk down the pathway to intercept the intruder.

“Who are you?” The father shouts, “Who are you, what do you want?” The rough man just walks forward with his eyes wide and his mouth open in awe. “Stay back! Who are you? What do you want?” But the stranger is silent, he comes closer until he is only a few metres away from the father, who shouts again, “Who are you, where are you from?”

And then the stranger speaks, “I...I don’t know who I am. I don’t know where I am from, I was a slave, I have always been a slave, in a country to the east. But an old man told me that I was not always a slave, he said that I was captured by an invading army as a baby, and that I was sold into slavery. He said he knew my father and mother, he said he knew the farm where they lived, and he told me how to...”

And now the father sees it. He sees past the dirt on the stranger’s face, he sees past the wild hair and the tangled beard, and he sees the spitting image of his two younger sons. He trembles, he cannot speak, he stumbles towards his first-born child, he puts his arms around him, his legs give way and he falls, but the oldest son is strong, and he lifts his father in his arms and carries him to the house. His mother is there, his two brothers...and...and...and...

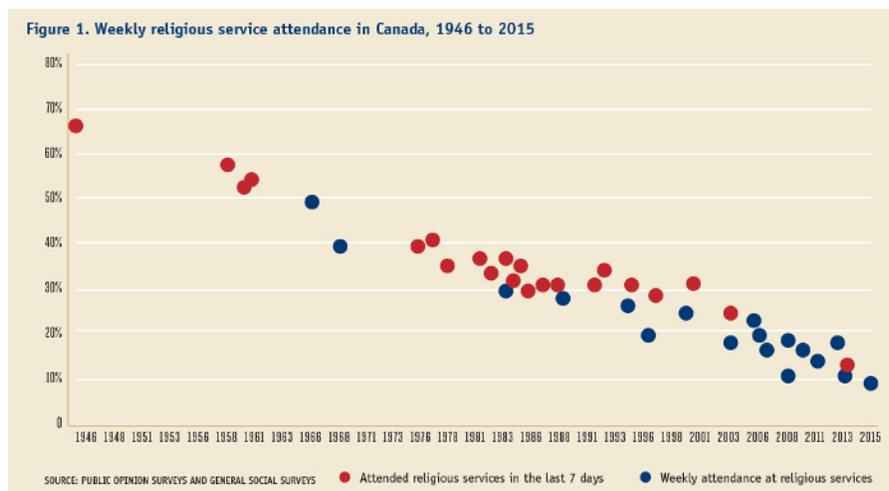
And I cannot describe the scene, it is too much, and it is beyond description. The kidnapped child, sold into slavery, assumed dead, has returned home, and the joy is vastly beyond even the joy of the return of the prodigal. That is the story of the return of the first-born child!

I know what you are thinking, “No way, Mark! Your imagination has gotten the better of you. There is no third son. We’ve read the story a hundred times, and there are just two boys!” Okay, you’re right, but give me a chance to explain. There was no third son in the original story, but there needs to be a third son today. In the original story, the two sons represent two groups. The older son represents those who grew up in the church and stayed in the church. The younger son represents those who grew up in the church, left the church, and then came back. It’s a great story; however, in today’s context, it is not adequate because it does not represent the largest group of people in our society. Both of the sons in the original story grew up in the church and know the church, but the vast majority of younger people in our society were not born into the church, did not grow up in the church, and have no knowledge of the church. We cannot say to them, “Why don’t you come back?” because they were never here! They are not the elder son. They are not the prodigal son. They are something else. They are the child who was never even given a chance to grow up in the church. They were raised in a strange foreign land. They do not even know that they are God’s children. They are the third son in my wild story! They are further distinguished from the prodigal because the prodigal made a willful decision to leave the church. The third son did not leave by stubborn choice, he was taken away by circumstances beyond his control. The people whom the third son represents had no choice about the land in which they were raised.

I am not sure of the best way to describe that land. There are a variety of ways to think about the land in which most children are raised today. They are raised in a country called “Capitalism,” the name of the king is “The Mighty Dollar.” They are raised in a land called “Monetisation,” where everything has a dollar value, and the name of the ruler is “King Jeff

Bezos.” Whatever you call it, it is not like the land ruled by the God of love and compassion. In God’s country, every person is equal, every person is regarded with dignity, and every person has eternal value. All these things are built on the foundation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In that other land, people are not equal. The wealthy are worth more than the poor. The strong are worth more than the weak. The healthy are worth more than the sick. It is a wonderful place if you are wealthy, strong, and healthy, but everyone else there is just a slave who will never have any concept of their true worth. The people raised in that land are neither the elder son nor the prodigal. They are the third son in the story of the prodigal, and they are the largest demographic in our society today.

There was a time when just about everyone in Canada went to church regularly. In 1946 nearly 70% of Canadians attended church weekly. In 1990 that number was 30%, and in 2020 it was 10%. After the pandemic, many people will likely not return to church, and that number will fall to around 5% - 7%. In the coming years, about 93% - 95% of the Canadian population will be the third son in the story of the prodigal. The chart below, taken from “In Trust, Centre for Theological Schools, 2016” demonstrates the decline. The chart is only relevant to 2016. The rate of decline accelerated between 2016 and 2020 and then became even more severe after 2020.



Before we talk about the best way for the church to move forward in Canada in the twenty-first century, we need to understand that we are living in a context that is unlike anything we have ever seen before. Once upon a time, we could assume that everyone had at least some kind of awareness of the Christian context. We could use certain language and be confident that everyone would understand us. Today, Christian language is just so much meaningless drivel to the vast majority of Canadians.

Christian terminology that was once a part of the Canadian vernacular now sounds like a foreign language. For example, if you try to describe a conflict between an ordinary person and a large organization by saying, “That’s a real David and Goliath story,” you will be met with

blank stares by 90% of people under the age of thirty. David and Goliath mean nothing. If it rains for three days and you say, "I'd better build an ark," most Canadians will respond by saying, "What are you going to build, and what does it have to do with rain?" Christian images no longer have any meaning. My favorite story about the loss of Christian symbols is about the young woman who goes into a jewelry store and says, "I'd like one of those necklaces with the "t," and the equally young clerk asks, "Do you want the plain "t" or the "t" with the little man on it?"

Christian symbols, words, and images have no meaning in the modern age. But it is not the loss of the symbols, words, and images that is devastating, it is the loss of the deep substance that is represented by those symbols, words, and images. All Christian symbols stand for the truth of God, the truth that all persons are equal, that all persons should be regarded with dignity, and that all persons have eternal worth. In the strange foreign land where most children are raised today, there is no guarantee of equality, dignity, or eternal worth. The almighty dollar is lord of all, and a person's worth is determined by their wealth. Everyone in that land is a slave and has no idea that they are a child of God, and have unlimited value in the eyes of their true father. They are the third child in the story of the prodigal. But they are God's children, they are our brothers and sisters, and we want them to find their true home.

I admit I've got a lot of nerve adding a third son to the story of the prodigal! But the social context today is different from the social context of the first century AD. The social context of today is even radically different from the social context of the year 2000. If we are going to bring people into the family of God we need to understand and accept the new context; the vast majority of people around us have no idea what the church is all about, or worse yet, if they have any concept of the church, it comes from what they see in the news about the rise of a perverse Christian-nationalism that is marked by racism, sexism, homophobia, materialism, and brutality. They know nothing of the true nature of Christ.

If there is to be a healthy future church that faithfully reflects the love of Christ, then we need to stand up to let the world know that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ all point to the equality of all people, the dignity of all people and the eternal worth of all people. Every church must become the place in the community where the oppressed are protected, the vulnerable are healed, and the lost are welcomed home. Every church must be a place of justice, wisdom and grace.

The eldest child must be valued, the prodigal must be forgiven...and the third child, the true eldest child, must be found and welcomed home to a place that has a whole different set of values than the foreign land in which they were raised.