

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 27, 2022

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Stronger than a Two-by-Four

Luke 15:1–3, 11–32

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Our text is the from the Parable of the Prodigal Son: **But while [the lost son] was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him** (v 20).

Sadly, sometimes it takes a two-by-four hitting us in the head to wake us up.
For the prodigal son, his two-by-four was a pigsty.
And the pigs in the pigsty had it better than he did.
At least they got to enjoy the mud and eat bean pods all day.
The prodigal didn't have it that good.
He was merely a hired hand—a servant of pigs.
A hired hand in a pigsty so tired and so hungry
 he slept in the mud and drooled over the pods being eaten by the pigs.
Now that's some two-by-four.

You might know what it's like to have a two-by-four moment.
Maybe yours wasn't that bad.
Maybe it was worse.
So, what is a "two-by-four moment"?
It's anything that serves as a wake-up call.
For example, a DUI. Divorce. Cancer. A pink slip. An eviction notice.
 A death. Legal trouble. An unexpected pregnancy. An affair.
 A nasty breakup. Financial loss. An accident. Addiction.
The list could go on and on.

Some say you have to hit rock bottom.
Living in a pigsty is bad enough.
But it's not rock bottom.
Rock bottom is deeper.
Six feet deeper.
I'm thankful the prodigal didn't end up there.

And I'm thankful that you aren't there either.

Sometimes we find ourselves hit by a two-by-four through no fault of our own.
But often we've got no one to blame but ourselves.

In the pigsty, the prodigal son finally took stock of his life:
How had he gotten into that situation in the first place?
What could he do to get out of the mess he'd made?

He replayed each painful step that led to the pigsty.
It's like a slow-motion video of a train wreck.
He had no one to blame but himself.
Of course, he never dreamed he would end up there.
No one ever does.

So when it all started, what was he thinking?
What did he expect?
I don't know.
But then I sometimes wonder what I was thinking or what I expected
when I did what I did.

In his case, it started when he—the younger of two sons—told his father,
“Put both feet in the grave. Drop dead.”
Okay, he was a little more polite than that, but that's effectively what he said:
“**Father, give me the share property that's coming to me**” (v 12).
I want my inheritance NOW.
It wasn't a request.
It was a demand.
So he began by dishonoring his father and his mother.
Be assured of this:
Breaking the commandments, especially the Fourth Commandment,
never ends well.

After all, honor your father and your mother is the first commandment with a promise:
“That it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”
Now that's not a money-back guarantee.
It doesn't mean that those who live long always honored their parents
or that those whose lives are short dishonored them.
So what does it mean?
It describes how we best enjoy the blessings of God's creation.

All things being the same, life will be better for those who honor their parents.
 And for those who don't, they'll find life harder.
 Dishonor your father and your mother,
 that it may go poorly with you and that you may live in a pigsty.
 Somehow, the prodigal son missed that part.

His words to his father were the first step that led toward the pigsty.
 There's a desire to be independent
 —to be free of the father and the father's house.
 There's greed.
 There's a desire to go into a far country.
 There's reckless living and the squandering of his property.
 I wonder, what was the first reckless thing he did?
 How did he squander those first ten dollars?
 And then the second, and the third, and . . .
 And all those smaller choices added up to bigger choices,
 each one digging him deeper into a hole,
 until the money was gone and the famine came
 and he landed in utter degradation and filth.
 Until the pigsty.

Even then, it wasn't seeing the pigsty that woke him up.
 It wasn't even hiring himself out to work in it.
 It was waking his hunger for the pigs' food.
 The two-by-four hit.

You hear it in his words.
 He sees his life for what it is,
 for what it's become.
 He realizes what he had and threw away.
But when he came to himself, he said,
"How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread,
but I perish here with hunger!"
 And then we hear his plan:
"I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him,
'Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you.
I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.
Treat me as one of your hired servants'" (vv 17–19).

That sounds about right to us,

just like it did to the Pharisees who first heard this parable.
He treated his father like he was dead,
so it's only right that he be treated like a hired servant, not a son.
Those who sin—especially those whose sins are notorious—
why, they should be treated as second-class citizens.
They've got to earn their way back—back into the father's good favor.
That's how we feel about it.

Of course, the father would be perfectly right to be angry,
to give his son the cold shoulder,
like this wasn't any son of his,
to treat him roughly and rudely.
All that would be justified.

So, the son shook his head, got up, and set out for home,
or whatever he would find of it.
The pigsty had hit him hard.

So he's trudging along, head down,
watching the mud dry on his rags,
rehearsing his little speech,
and hoping for some cold oatmeal when he gets home.

Trudging along when—WHAM!—
something way stronger than a two-by-four hits him.
It's more like a four-by-four or a ten-by-ten.
He wasn't expecting that.
And for a few moments, he doesn't even know what happened.
Something's wrapped around him,
holding him tight,
picking him up.
Before he knows it,
his cheeks are wet and he doesn't know if he's sobbing or laughing.

It's his father.
The strong arms of his father.
The strong arms of his father embracing him.

For **while he was still a long way off,**
his father saw him and felt compassion,

and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

And before the son can finish his little rehearsed speech,
 before he even finishes saying that he's a poor, miserable sinner
 and not much of a son,
 before he can even get to the part about being like a hired hand—
 before all that,
 the father is calling out to the servants,
 saying to bring the best robe, and a ring, and grab some shoes, too,
 and kill the fattened calf while you're at it!

For this my son was dead, and is alive again;

he was lost, and is found.

And they began to celebrate (v 24).

The father's hug was stronger than any two-by-four.

His kindness and love are the real wake up call.

Grace leaves the most permanent mark of all—

for if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old has passed away; behold, the new has come (2 Cor 5:17–18).

To be honest, we can make sense of how we ended up in the pigsty

longing for bean pods,

We can trace each little decision and small step down that path

and see how it led there.

What we can't really make sense of is how we ended up back in the father's house,

back as sons, not as servants,

with the robe and the ring and the shoes,

eating the fattened calf who was sacrificed for us.

God loved the world so that He gave

His only Son the lost to save!

Who can measure that love?

Who can plumb its depths?

Who can understand it?

Not counting our trespasses against us (2 Cor 5:19).

Forgiving our trespasses—all our sins,

known and unknown, intended and unintended.

Making **Him to be sin who knew no sin,**

so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).

Love like this has a cost.
The cross was no two-by-four and the those were no carpenter's nails.
It was more like ties and spikes from a railroad.
And then, for us, Jesus hit rock bottom.

That's what makes grace so strong.
It's got His blood and His sweat and His tears and His death in it.
And it's got His life, too.

So we say with Isaiah:

**"I will give thanks to You, O Lord,
for though You were angry with me,
Your anger has turned away,
that You might comfort me.**

**Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the Lord God is my strength and my song,
and He has become my salvation"** (Isaiah 12:1-2).

No, we don't deserve this.
We don't deserve it any more than the prodigal son did.

But here we are.
Welcomed home.
Sons, not servants.
And what you're feeling—that thing that left's a permanent mark on your life—
that's no two-by-four.
That's the love of God for you in Christ Jesus.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ
Jesus.

Phil 4:7
