



The Prodigal Son

An intergenerational ecotheological worship

by Brian Goodings

Note: There may not need to be a sermon during this service; rather let the sermon form itself from the dramas and discussion. If a sermon is desired, I have found Sallie McFague to be one of the clearest ecotheological Christian theologians. (See “Resources” on page 36.)

The dramas might be a narrative told or read by one person or scenes acted out by a number of people. Either way, the point is to spark conversation and make the connection between the parable and our current ecological and theological situation.

Opening Reading

Luke 15:11–32 (the parable of the prodigal son)

Call to Worship

Draw nearer to the hearth of God’s warming flame that burns at the centre of our faith.

Throw your burdensome titles and entitlements into the fire and stand beside our neighbours in creation whom we have frozen out of the God-story for far too long.

Prepare no speeches and offer no clever excuses for behaviours that have led to our toxic estrangement from God and neighbour.

Instead, let us bow our heads in humility and start faith-walking home.

The return to our proper place within God’s household is long overdue but now is the time to begin our journey.

Prayer of Approach/Confession

O God, we approach you with hearts that are sickened from our own behaviours, which have impoverished all life. Our excesses have left us obese, remorseful, and alone. We have greatly overspent our share of your creation and have stolen much of our neighbour’s. Now we are beginning to realize what we have done to your holy household of creation.

We have done little to deserve your graciousness and abiding patience. Yet we are lost enough to ask you cautiously to remind us once again of the Christ way to well-

ness and health. We trust that Jesus’ touch of communion-wellness will be more contagious than our diseased choices. Amen.

Words of Assurance

(if former used as Prayer of Confession)

There is more life in God than death in us; there is more future in God than past in us; there is more forgiveness in God than sin in us; there is more light in God than darkness in us. Thanks be for God’s extravagance, and for coming to know our limits.

Hymn

Voices United #295, “The Earth and All Who Breathe”

Drama: Scene 1

See page 35.

Open Discussion

Allow one to three minutes for people to speak out their responses to the drama. (Ecotheology link with parable: Demanding our inheritance of creation without regard for any others. Our petulant behaviour has been grossly self-serving and has led to many of the current crises facing creation.)

Possible questions: Whom do the figures in the parable represent to you? How does this relate to the environmental situation we are facing now?

Foot Sizes: Part 1

See box, page 34.

Hymn

More Voices #163, “River Running in You and Me”

Drama: Scene 2

See page 35.

Open discussion

(Ecotheology link with parable: This is where many of us

find ourselves today. We have squandered much of what was precious to us in dissolute living and now we realize how lost and really hungry we are.)

Possible question: Given the state of the world, the increasing extinction rates of our neighbours in creation, and the degradation of so much of the land and water, is it fair to say that our time is marked with widespread loneliness and regret?

Homily/Reflection (if desired)

Hymn

More Voices #135, "Called by Earth and Sky"

Drama: Scene 3

See page 35.

Open discussion

(Ecotheology link with parable: We may well have decided to return to a right relationship with God and creation, but there will certainly be consequences for us and creation.)

Possible question: Do we have the right to expect a place in God's creation given the deadly havoc our greed has caused the world?

Foot Sizes: Part 2

See box.

Closing Hymn

Voices United #307, "Touch the Earth Lightly"

Commissioning

**God be in my head and in my understanding;
 God be in my eyes and in my looking;
 God be in my mouth and in my speaking;
 God be in my heart, and in my thinking;
 God be at my end, and at my departing.**

Source: attributed to St Patrick, 5th century

Note: Permission is given to reproduce this worship service and the drama for use in worship.

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Foot Sizes

Use this as a reflection time with children/adults.

Part 1

Use a map of the world or globe and place outlines of people figures in the following different sizes on the appropriate countries. Based on current estimates of our ecological footprints (water and land used per person per year), a person from North America is about 10 times the size of a person from India or China. The average size of a figure from Europe is about three quarters the size of a North American. A figure from United Arab Emirates is even larger than a North American. The average size of a figure from other countries is about one quarter the size of a North American.

It is now estimated that if everyone in the world lived as we do, it would take between four and six additional planets to meet these requirements. After placing the human figures on the map, try to find room to place figures representing animals and other creatures, which will be hard to fit.

Part 2

Return to the map or globe and talk about how big our figures should really be within God's creation. Leave it as a task for the congregants to suggest ways we may become that size. These may include initiatives like greening the church or there may be local causes in which the congregation might be involved. The point is to find ways to shrink our ecological footprint.

The Prodigal Son Drama

I see a tremendous commonality within the movement of the parable of the prodigal son and the awakened ecologically sensitive Christian. In the parable the younger son unfairly demands his inheritance before it is rightfully his and wastes it on harmful ways of living that serve his appetites alone. He becomes sick in heart and body and ends up destitute and starving for every kind of nourishment. Like many Christians I know, he finally sees the damage he has done and then awakens with a hangover of regret. The story is about his return to find his rightful place within the community he had treated unfairly. What happens to him after he has repented is about as hopeful a story ever told. It is my hope, but not my assumption, that God extends that kind welcome to those of us who have also wasted our ecological inheritance but turn finally toward finding our rightful home within creation.

Scene 1 (Luke 15:11–13)

The drama could include dialogue between the father and his son(s), pointing out how the younger one's demand for his inheritance was utterly out of sync with the natural progression. The loving father however, honours his son's request. The scene might end with the younger son, his pockets stuffed with cash, walking away from the saddened father. This dialogue might be as follows:

Son: I'm sick of working and tending this stupid farm. It's nothing but work from dawn 'til dusk. Every penny we earn seems to go back into this place. Why don't we just sell everything and go and have some real fun?

Father: This is where we have lived for generations. I have invested everything in this land to give you and your brother and your children and their children's children a future.

Son: Well, I don't care about that. I want my share of this place to spend as I choose. I don't intend on having children and I'm sick of you and my brother. I want to live NOW!

Father: If you leave you will break the cycle....and you will break our family and my heart.

Son: Your heart is your business, not mine. I want out!

Scene 2 (Luke 15:14–19)

This is a monologue full of regret and remorse. The loneliness of the son is quite heartrending. His decision to return home is a choice for life rather than death, but it requires great courage. Suggested dialogue:

Son: (*sitting by himself and sighing deeply*) And now it's gone. All of it. I feel sick and so lonely, but who cares? The money went so fast and now all my so-called friends are gone. I hate my life and what I've done. How could I have been so stupid and greedy? I might as well be dead. I am dead. Now I have nothing to lose. I might as well go back to the place where I will be buried. I will go and ask my father (can I still call him that?) for a job in the fields. I will promise to work hard for no payment at all but a place in the bunkhouse. I regret everything I've done. (*silence and deep sighs*)

Scene 3 (Luke 15: 20–32)

We cannot assume that the decision to return "home" is an easy one that does not require any repentance and comes without any cost. If we do, then nothing at all has changed in us. We are now in a time of consequences and many species will bear the cost of our damaging behaviours.

It is a mistake to suggest that the older brother, who has remained truly faithful, is going to be thrilled with our return. The watchwords for us now are humility and repentance as we hope for signs of forgiveness and resurrection. It would be grossly presumptuous to expect that these gifts from God are our automatic rights. We might properly end with hope, but also with a sense that we wear tattered sackcloth and sit in the ashes of an earth community that we have scorched. Possible dialogue:

Son: (*practising speech as he walks*) I was wrong, all wrong. I have no right to be your son. All I ask is for a job and a place in the bunkhouse with the others. I will never mention our relationship to anybody. I'm sorry.

Father: Hello! I love you, son! Everybody, come quickly! He is alive and has come back to me. Get everything ready for the greatest party ever. He lives! He lives!

Older Son: (*stands in stunned silence*) Do you not remember what he did to us? How could you be so happy? I was the one who stayed and worked and did without and mucked out the stalls and fixed the fences and planted the crops. He is the one who left. He stole from us. He wasted it all. We should be throwing rocks at him, not preparing for a feast!

Father: Do you not understand, my beloved son? You have always had the best I could offer. I have never refused you anything, but your brother was dead and now he is alive. Isn't that worth celebrating?

Older Son: No. I don't think so. I wish he were dead.