

**BGO Sermon for 9-4-16 – God’s Story, My Story, Our Story: Prodigal Servant**  
**Isaiah 6:1-8 (NKJV) I Corinthians 9:19-23 (Message) Luke 15:22-27 (NLT)**

“You Can’t Leave Your Beliefs at the Door”:

that was the headline in the paper over two decades ago now.

A reporter from the Quad City Times was doing an article about a flea market I was heading up at the church.

He asked a little about me, found out I worked at the East Moline Water Plant, one thing led to another, and I ended up being profiled on the Faith & Values page. In the article, I shared how my beliefs influenced my work, and how I expressed a personal and not private faith in my workplace, even in a government position where “church” and “state” don’t necessary mix. And I shared how what a person really believes always comes out in their actions, wherever they are.

Something that stuck with me in my years in the workforce was the phrase “Civil Servant.”

I always thought I did my best work at the Water Plant, and my best ministry there, when I remembered that in my secular position and my life in Christ, I was called to be a servant.

The last two weeks we’ve looked at the Prodigal story from the Gospel of Luke, part of an ongoing series where I’ve shared some of my life story, connecting it with our story as Christians and the events recounted in the Bible, all as part of that bigger story of God’s Love as expressed in Jesus Christ.

As we’ve looked at the Luke passage,

we’ve pointed out that the word “prodigal” means excessive and extravagant.

We’ve seen ourselves as the younger son,

prodigal in our rebellion until we return to our Good Good Father God.

And we’ve recognized that at times we’ve been the older son,

excessive in our judgement of others,

and how we need to be like the Father, seeking out the lost and welcoming them in, even before they’ve cleaned themselves up.

I’ve said that everyone in the parable Jesus told was prodigal in one way or another. Even the fatted calf was prodigal in his sacrifice to the celebration: after all, he gave all he had.

So I thought that with this being Labor Day weekend,

it would be good to look at one prodigal that seems to be forgotten in the story: the prodigal servant.

A few weeks ago I went to a seminar with the lead pastor of one of the largest United Methodist churches in the United States. He talked about how Christians progress in their deepening relationship with Jesus. He said that those who start attending church might begin as what he called “sacramental consumers”: coming on Sunday to the service while not having much else to build up their faith. The problem is way too many Christians stay sacramental consumers, never growing in their faith. I heard another term for those folks from a pastor: he called them “pew potatoes.”

But the presenter talked more about another group of Christians, those who have really come to know and feel the love of Christ in their lives, and understand the call that God makes to them: he called this group “Kingdom Servants.” As he described them, I saw those same traits reflected in the prodigal servant in Jesus’ parable. The question is: are those traits reflected in our lives? Do we fit the mold as Kingdom Servants, or would we make better pew potatoes?

As one would imagine, Kingdom Servants are prodigal in their **service**, excessive in the service they give, extravagant in the ways they serve. As Jesus tells the story, he doesn’t say that the servants refused any part of the work gathering the clothes, setting the tables, even the messy job of butchering the calf. They responded to the call that was made to them. When Kingdom Servants hear God say, *Whom shall I send & who will go for Us?* they say, *“Here am I! Send me.”*

The presenter at the conference I went to said that at their church, committees are committed to never vote “no” to something Jesus would do. Folks here on committees, does that fit your mindset?

You hear willingness to respond to God’s call in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: *I’ve become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life.*

He didn’t take on their way of life, keeping **his** bearings in Christ—but he entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. Like we talked about a few weeks ago with Paul’s mentor Barnabas, we are called to enter into people’s lives to help them enter that God-saved, God-led, God-centered life.

Kingdom servants are prodigal with their **time**.

When the Father says “Quick,” he means it.

Every command he makes to the servants is a “do it now” command,  
because the Father knows the time is now.

The presenter at the conference made a distinction between Kingdom Servants  
and those he called “volunteers” –

the ones who are ready to give of “their” time, but not ready to go “all-in”.  
Servants knew back in Jesus’ day that their time was not their own;  
Kingdom Servants know that too.

Kingdom Servants learn that when they follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit  
and do it right then, wonderful things happen.

Does “volunteer” fit you better than “Kingdom Servant” does?

Kingdom servants are also extravagant with their **compassion**.

I’ll say more about the servant’s response to the older brother in a bit,  
but look at the last part of what he says:

***We are celebrating because of his safe return.***

Safe and sound, whole: that’s how some translations put it.

This is a servant who cares, who has entered into the life of a lost & now found son.  
Part of the calling of a Kingdom Servant is to look with compassion on others,  
whatever their situation in life.

Another part of that calling is caring for those nearby,

as the servant in the parable did, and looking “a long way off” as the Father did.

Kingdom Servants spread their nets wide,

to those at home and those around the world.

It’s an outward focus, not an inward one, that keeps things moving.

Are we as Kingdom Servants looking outward, a long way off?

And Kingdom Servants are prodigal with their **giving**.

As we’ve said, the servants in the parable gave of their time and talent,  
and no doubt if they had any,

would have given freely and faithfully of their money as well.

These servants gave freely;

they gave out of the understanding that everything they possessed  
belonged not to them, but to their master.

Are we giving freely and faithfully of all that has been given us?

Are we giving our best, or just our leftovers?

And Kingdom Servants are extravagant in their relationship.

The servant says, *“We are celebrating.”*

Servants partying along with the guests would have been unheard of in those days, and yet, the relationships between Master and servants, between everyone in the household, were so good all could come together rejoicing. That didn't and doesn't happen overnight.

That calls for being deeply invested in others, in their joys and in their sorrows, recognizing their victories and spurring them on after their setbacks.

When we talked about Barnabas, I asked you to imagine what it might look like if we talked with each other about how we're doing in being more like Jesus: our prayer, our study, our worship;

if we talked about how we are sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, like in our mission statement;

if we sought out people to encourage in their lives and in their ministry.

That's Kingdom Servant living. How are we doing in that?

There's one more to add to that list of Kingdom Servant traits, and you ought to grab a pen and write this one down, because it puts all the rest in perspective:

A Kingdom Servant is Prodigal, excessive, extravagant, lavish - in **joy**.

Remember from two weeks ago how the Message paraphrase put the servants answer to the older son?

*‘Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.’* Can't you hear the joy in that?

Kingdom Servants have every reason to be joyful.

They recognize how the Master provides for them, food enough to spare both physical and spiritual.

They see the Lord high and lifted up, and they celebrate that in worship, joining in the cries of Holy, Holy, Holy.

They join the celebration as the lost ones come home, & sit at the table for the feast. And most of all, they share in the joy of their Master.

It's out of the love and joy they feel, that they respond as Paul does:

they don't just want to talk about it; they want to be in on it!

I went to the Fellowship of Christian Athletes huddle last week, and was reminded of Jesus' example of service on the night of the Last Supper.

All the disciples had rejected the job of washing feet, for many reasons the job assigned to the lowest slave.

But Jesus, the greatest among them in rank, position and spirit, took off his robe & willingly took the worst task of the night,

He then told his disciples, *“if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other’s feet. I’ve laid down a pattern for you... If you understand what I’m telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life.*

You Can’t Leave Your Beliefs at the Door,

but this is the door where you can change them.

Jesus calls us to live differently, where we move from once-a-week pew sitting to expressing our Kingdom Servant life wherever we are.

Maybe we start with praying before every call we make or receive;

I can’t tell you what a difference it made at the Water Plant

when praying reminded me I was a servant.

Maybe it’s taking part in helping others, and not just aiding

but entering into the lives of those we’re helping or those we’re working beside.

But certainly it’s listening to the Holy Spirit,

as God asks *“Whom shall I send, And who will go for Us?”*

Jesus knew that service brings blessings beyond our understanding,

So He went where His calling took Him, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

It was out of that understanding

that he would then take on the worst task of human history,

taking the sins of the world to the cross and dying that we might live.

It was service, it was sacrifice, it was salvation.

If you understand what I’m telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life.

TO COMMUNION>