

## September 1 2024 Rev Jo Smith

15 years ago when the youngest two in our family were 10 and 12, we took them for a late afternoon visit to Para Wirra. I apologise to those of you who have heard this story before....it really is one of those defining moments in our parenting journey and it does find its way into a great many of my reflections. Anyway, it was that time of day that parents affectionately refer to as “zoo hour.” Everyone needed a change of scene. So we took them to Para Wirra with some sausages, a loaf of bread, some sauce and drinks. Let them have a run around, a simple sausage sizzle for dinner and home for an early night.

My heart dropped into my stomach and my body took over in a hyper-ventilating mess of a way. My mind raced thinking that someone had whisked my children into a van. Breathing became impossible and I started to shake. My children were gone.

Fortunately they were not abducted and they were totally fine. But they had, for whatever reason decided not to follow the edge of the lake and had turned off looking for the source of a small waterfall, wandered out of the park. A few hours later a lovely lady who lived nearby rang to say our kids were safe with her.

I have no idea what kind of soul-crushing pain one must experience when a child is really gone. But the few hours I experienced a glimpse of it...an experience shared by many when they cannot find their child at the show or a shopping mall or when they don't get off the bus one afternoon, were some of the most heart breaking moments of my life.

Because, when it comes down to it, it makes you vulnerable to have a child. To have a child is to leave yourself vulnerable to a broken heart in the way nothing else can. Someone once said that we are

only ever as happy as our unhappiest child. Which is why I started wondering this week about the vulnerability of God.

There is much talk out there about the strength of God and the mightiness of God and the awesomeness of God. But what of the vulnerability of God?

That God would breath into dust and create us in God's own image....that God would bring humanity into being as God's own beloved children was to leave God's self vulnerable to a broken heart in a way nothing else could have. What a risk God took creating us. Giving us enough freedom to be creators and destroyers. Giving us enough freedom for us to make a mess of everything and act as our own Gods and to also trust in God and love each other.

I just wonder if this is what Jesus is telling us about in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

I will confess to you that until I was well and truly an adult I totally thought the word prodigal meant returning having repented of your wrongs. Or at least I thought prodigal meant coming home after having been independent and stupid for awhile. Uh Uh. The word *prodigal* actually means Spending resources freely and recklessly; being wastefully extravagant.

I've always heard this parable, one of the most famous stories in the Gospel, titled the Parable of the Prodigal son. But out of everything we could say this story is about – why do we say it's about the wasteful extravagance of the younger son? Why is that the focus when it's not even that interesting?

I mean, It's actually common for young people to leave home, waste their lives and their money for awhile until they have no other option but to come home to the parents they didn't treat very well when they were leaving in the first place. Maybe we make this a

story about the wasteful stupidity of the younger son because it's a story we are more familiar with than the alternative, which is this: if the word prodigal means wasteful extravagance, then isn't it really the story of the prodigal father? Today, maybe because it is Father's Day let's make this the story of the prodigal father.

Isn't it wastefully extravagant for the Father to give his children so much freedom? Isn't it wastefully extravagant for the Father to discard his dignity and run into the street toward a foolish and immature son who squandered their fortune? Isn't it wastefully extravagant for the father to throw such a fabulous party for this kind of wayward son?

But, see, I love *that* kind of grace.

I personally love that Jesus tells this story of the prodigal father in response to the Pharisee's indignation that Jesus would eat with tax collectors and prostitutes.

Some of us might find the grace the father shows to the younger son to border on offensive, but the thing that really gets me in this story is how wastefully extravagant the Father is toward the *older* son also. The kid who never left him. The one who has always done everything right. The kid who is clean cut and went to uni straight after school and got a good graduate job and saved up for a house deposit right away. The kid who always does the right thing but also resentfully notices all the mistakes their siblings are making. The kid who feels entitled. The kid who can't stomach going into a party to celebrate the return of his useless brother. I don't like that older brother even as I cringe at the ways I know I'm more than little bit like him. You know what's wastefully extravagant in my book?: the fact that the Father says to that kid "all that is mine is yours".

What risk God takes on us. Children who waste everything in dissolute living. Children who begrudge grace being extended to people who so clearly don't deserve it. But this is a risk born of love. God risks so much by loving us which is why, today anyway, I prefer calling this the Parable of the Prodigal Father.

Because it is here we see that your relationship to God is simply not defined by your really bad decisions or your squandering of resources. But also your relationship to God is not determined by your virtue. It is not determined by being nice, or being good or even, and I struggle with this, but it's not even determined by how much you do for the church. Your relationship to God is simply determined by the wastefully extravagant love of God. A God who takes no account of risk but runs toward you, while you are still far off, before you have even managed to get out the words, I'm sorry, who wraps you in his love and honour and throws a heavenly banquet for you. Who even, when you are reluctant to join in the party, because you can't believe that he would invite THOSE PEOPLE, doesn't give up on you. Pleads with you and still says "all that is mine is yours." Amen

Prodigal indeed. Wastefully extravagant love and grace and mercy without end. Thanks be to God.