

“Burdens Lifted: The Gospel According to *Good Will Hunting*”  
Lent 4C (March 31, 2019)  
Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter, Amen.<<

Journalist Juno DeMelo wrote an article recently on *pre-crastination* titled “When the Early Bird Gets the Shaft.”<sup>1</sup> In it she admits to precrastinating from an early age when she yanked her baby teeth out before they were ready. She admits to flipping pancakes before they bubble on the griddle; getting to the grocery store before it opens; turning in work before it’s due. “The urge to complete a task is so strong,” she writes, that “I forge ahead even when I know waiting would lead to a better outcome.” Precrastination has been studied by psychologist David Rosenbaum who defines it as “the tendency to tackle subgoals at the earliest opportunity - even at the expense of extra effort.” He likens it to going to the grocery store and loading up your basket with a bunch of apples, and carrying them around the store even though you know you’ll pass the apple aisle again before getting to the checkout counter.

Last year, Lisa Fournier, professor of psychology at Washington State University, conducted a study on precrastination that had people retrieve two buckets of balls. One bucket was about 10 feet in front of them, and the other was 10 feet beyond that. Instead of doing the easier task of picking up the second bucket and grabbing the first one on the way back, 80% of people participating in the study picked up the first bucket, carried it with them to the second bucket, and brought both back to the starting point. This percentage jumped higher when participants were placed under mental strain. When Fournier had participants memorize a series of numbers that they would have to recall after retrieving the balls, 90% of them grabbed the first bucket, carried it to the second, and brought both back. “It [can be] so mentally onerous to carry a to-do list in our mind,” explained one psychologist, that “we tend to start with the task that can be done as soon as possible,” and “we’ll engage in behaviors that let us reduce that cognitive load even if it means exerting more effort . . . .” “In other words,” writes Juno DeMelo, we may “carry a ‘bucket’ around with [us] unnecessarily just so [we] can be done picking it up - even if doing so makes it difficult to complete other goals.”

If some people like Juno DeMelo admit to pre-crastination, others admit to pro-crastination. In a recent UCC Daily Devotional titled “Procrastinators [Of the World] Unite...Tomorrow,” Marchae Grair admits to being a *procrastinator*. “I call [my work habits] ‘purposeful procrastination,’” she explains. “[It’s] the special talent of convincing myself to focus on work that isn’t due in the foreseeable future instead of completing work with immediate deadlines. I am so good at this bad habit,” she says, “that I decided to take a class about procrastination. The teacher didn’t focus on how to stop it, but instead focused on why people like me do it. She hypothesized that procrastinators are not lazy, as commonly suggested. Instead, she said we are hardworking people who are inhibited by our perfectionism. We are so afraid to confront potential failure that we convince ourselves there

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<sup>1</sup> I am following DeMelo’s story in this introduction - sometimes quoting directly from it, sometimes paraphrasing: [https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/25/smarter-living/precrastination-when-the-early-bird-gets-the-shaft.html?fallback=0&reclid=1JAZMbzDRr7CvRdHy9JeMH0YNfO&locked=1&geoContinent=NA&geoRegion=NY&recAlloc=home-geo&geoCountry=US&blockId=home-living-vi&imp\\_id=242658312&action=click&module=Smarter%20Living&pgtype=Homepage](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/25/smarter-living/precrastination-when-the-early-bird-gets-the-shaft.html?fallback=0&reclid=1JAZMbzDRr7CvRdHy9JeMH0YNfO&locked=1&geoContinent=NA&geoRegion=NY&recAlloc=home-geo&geoCountry=US&blockId=home-living-vi&imp_id=242658312&action=click&module=Smarter%20Living&pgtype=Homepage)

isn't enough time to finish anything. I left that class," writes Grair, "realizing how much I get in my own way, especially when I'm afraid to fail."

Juno DeMelo and Marchae Grair represent different types of people, conveniently labeled *pre-* and *pro-*crastinators - those who dive right in to clear to-do lists and those who put things off because they're perfectionists. Maybe there's a little bit of both in each of us, which is how I read the parable of Jesus we heard a moment ago: the story about the so-called Prodigal Son. The story is actually about two sons - the younger son (the "Prodigal") and his older brother. And while some of us may identify more with one or the other, I suspect Jesus was making the point that there's a little bit of both sons in each of us. The younger son is portrayed as the risk-taker and the rule-breaker. The older son is more cautious and responsible. I'm not sure they can be classified as either *pre-* or *pro-*crastinators, but it seems like the younger son has boxes in his life to-do list, one of which includes taking his share of the family inheritance and living large, while the older son seems to be more the perfectionist, following the rules, managing the family business, dotting the "i's" and crossing the "t's."

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is the third of a trilogy of parables in Luke ch. 15: the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost (prodigal) son. The three parables are told by Jesus as a response to the grumblings of the religious leaders who can't understand why Jesus would eat with tax collectors and sinners. Sharing a table with outcasts - welcoming outcasts - is one of Jesus' calling cards. Whether it was a leper who no one would touch, or a woman at a well who no one would talk to, or a woman accused of a capital crime, or a rich tax collector who everyone despised. Jesus was even accused of being a drunk and a glutton - a partier, who ate and drank and lived it up with riff-raff. Luke, the gospel writer, narrates the setting of today's parable: "All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus," writes Luke. "And the Pharisees and the scribes (the religious leaders, the older brothers) were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!'" Jesus doesn't dispute the charge; but he does respond by telling three stories. The first is about a shepherd with a flock of 100 sheep. "Which one of you," says Jesus, "having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until it's found?" "Or," says Jesus, as he tells the second parable, "what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?" Or, says Jesus, introducing the third parable - today's gospel reading - consider the man who has two sons. The younger son asked for his share of the inheritance. The father gave it to him, and the younger son squandered it in a distant land on "dissolute living." After wasting it all - after being "prodigal" with his share of the money - the younger son became homeless and destitute - so destitute that the only job he could find was feeding pigs. And he was so hungry, adds Jesus, that he longed to eat the pigs' food.

We should pause for just a moment and consider the state of the younger brother. Jesus is telling this story as a Jew to fellow Jews presumably about a Jewish younger brother. And this Jewish younger brother had descended so low that he was tending pigs and longing for their food. Pigs are the quintessential non-Kosher animals. "The pig," says Jewish law in the book of Leviticus, "is unclean." When Jesus told this story in the first century, Jewish customs were well-known in the Roman world. There's even a story about the Roman Emperor Caligula in the year 40 CE being aware of Jewish Kosher laws that forbade the

eating of pork. It's probably for dramatic effect that Jesus speaks of the younger brother in the parable as feeding pigs and longing for pigs' food - a way to underscore the depths of the younger brother's "Downward Spiral," as the band Nine Inch Nails puts it.

It's when he bottoms out - last denarius spent, his belly starving, it's when he's desperate - that the younger brother, says Jesus, "came to himself." One of you mentioned at Wednesday's Bible Study as we examined this text that maybe this phrase - "he came to himself" - is a sign that a divine spark resides in all of us - a spark that can't be extinguished no matter how far we've fallen. Or, to put this differently, no one - no matter who they are, no matter what they've done, no matter how low they've descended - no one is beyond hope. No one can be ultimately outside the grace and love of God. It's such an important message - especially this week - as we've heard yet again politicians in the highest offices in our land sneer at migrants on our southern border, dismissing them and their horrific stories as a "con job."<sup>2</sup> To such cruel callousness, Jesus responds, "the younger son came to himself" - no one, says Jesus, is beyond hope; no one should be written off; no one is beyond grace.

It's when he bottoms out - when he's at the end of his rope, when he's desperate - that the younger son comes to himself and constructs a speech - a speech I can imagine him practicing as he began the journey home: "Father," his speech begins, "I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." I can imagine the younger son reciting this speech over and over, step by step as he walked home. The beauty of this story is that it's really not about the younger son; and it's really not about the older son - the perfectionist who followed the rules. This parable is about the father; it's a story about God - God who is like the searching shepherd leaving the flock to find that one, lost sheep; God who is like the searching woman, lighting candles and toppling furniture - sweeping the house - to find her lost coin. God...the father who anguishes over his lost son - anguishes and hopes every day as he peers down the road that today might be the day his son returns. I can even imagine the father making a routine of it: standing on his porch each day as the sun sets, squinting down the road, praying fervently, to see his son again.

Yes, I think this parable is a theological statement about God - the father, who gives half his wealth to his younger son, no questions asked. A story about God, the Father who listens patiently as his older son gives him a tongue-lashing for throwing a party to celebrate the return of the younger son. It's a story about God, the Father who completely dismisses the younger son's practiced speech: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." The Father brushes this aside after jumping off his porch, racing down the road, and enveloping his lost son, who's now returned, in hugs and kisses, in rings and robes, and homecoming parties. The father in the story - God - can't help but treat each of his children as children no matter what they've done, whether they've squandered everything and are desperate; whether they've dotted all the "i's" and crossed all the "t's" and are grumpy when others are welcomed home with hugs and rings and parties. God loves us just as we are, and nothing we do - whether we wander or whether we pout - nothing can change God's relationship to us. God can't help but love wastefully - love like a prodigal. So, maybe this parable should have a different title: How about the Parable of the Prodigal Father?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/trump-mocks-asylum-seekers-814989/>

The power of wasteful love from a father figure is a theme in the 1997 film *Good Will Hunting*. It's a story about a young genius from South Boston named Will. Will has a photographic memory, and is able to read books in mere minutes, as fast as it takes him to flip each page. He's also a janitor at MIT, where he mops floors outside the classroom of an MIT Professor of Mathematics - Professor Lambeau - who's a Fields Medal winner. One day Professor Lambeau constructs a problem and posts it on a board in the hallway, expecting it to take his best students a full semester to solve. Will glances at the problem, finishes cleaning the floor, and then at home on his bathroom mirror with a pen that writes on glass, solves the problem, looks at his solution, erases it, goes back to MIT, and writes the solution on the board in the MIT hallway. He does all of this in secret. A stunned Professor Lambeau constructs an even harder problem and posts it on the board, which Will also solves but gets caught in the act as he's writing the solution; and it soon becomes clear to Professor Lambeau that he's discovered a boy-genius from Southie with an intellect shared by less than a handful of people in the world. Will's genius is buried beneath a rough exterior - an exterior crust built from years of abuse as a child in foster care, and in and out of juvenile detention. To keep him out of jail and to preserve the treasure of his mind, Professor Lambeau introduces Will to a therapist named Sean. Sean is a father figure for Will, and in the film's climactic scene, Sean cracks through Will's wall of protection. They're sitting in Sean's office, flipping through pictures of a bruised and battered Will from past police reports and psychological evaluations. Sean closes the file and looks at his surrogate son, and says, "It's not your fault." "Yeah, I know that," says Will dismissively. "Look at me son," says Sean. "It's not your fault." "I know," says Will, more urgently. "It's not your fault," says Sean again. "I know," says Will. "No, no you don't," says Sean as he moves closer and looks Will in the eyes. "It's not your fault," he says. "It's not your fault." "It's not your fault." "It's not your fault." And Will breaks down. "It's not your fault," says Sean again, as he embraces his surrogate son. "It's not your fault," he whispers, as Will sobs, and, for the first time in his life, allows himself to be loved.

...I think the Parable of the Prodigal Father is a story of how God meets us where we're at - a story about how God will whisper the words "it's not your fault" "it's not your fault" to those of us who need to hear them; it's a story about how the prodigal God embraces us, whether we're rule-followers or rule-breakers, whether we are wasteful or perfectionists, whether we *pre-* or *pro-* crastinate, whether we're tax collectors and sinners or Pharisees and scribes. God is the wastefully loving parent of us all. Amen.