

SERMON  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
March 14, 2010

Joshua 5:9-12  
Psalm 32  
2 Corinthians 5:16-21  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

If there is one thing that just about everyone can agree on, is that Jesus of Nazareth was a master storyteller. He wasn't like the traditional rabbi of his day who quoted intricate and boring theological arguments. He wasn't like the religious teachers who proof-texted everything with monotonous citations from the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus simply told engaging stories that cleverly revealed what the Kingdom of God was like.

He told wonderful and memorable stories like the story of The Good Samaritan, the story of The Rich Man and Lazarus, and of course the story we heard today – the classic story of what has come to be known as “The Prodigal Son.” According to Charles Dickens, the story of The Prodigal Son, is the finest short story ever written or told.

Now if you have been participating in our mid-week Lenten studies, you will perhaps have heard all you wish to hear about this story. We have been looking at it in depth. We talked about how a more fitting title for the story might be; “The Prodigal God.” For it is the father of the story, indeed God, who is the “spendthrift.” It is God who lavishly spends his love and forgiveness on both sons.

So this morning, I decided to do a little something different. Instead of just explaining the story, I thought that I would tell you another story. In effect, like what Jesus did, the story itself will be the sermon.

This story was written by Dr. Richard Jenson, former professor of homiletics at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago.

A word to our confirmation students. For your sermon notes today, I would like you to just fill out the top portions so that I can count you present in worship today. But do not take notes on the sermon. Stories are meant to be listened to. Then we can reflect on it tonight.

For the rest of you, I would like for you to maybe find characters or situations that you might be able to relate to. Who are you in the story? How does the story speak to your life?

The story is entitled; “The Lonely Lady of Blairstown Park”

*Once upon a time, there was a family named Miller. George and Jean Miller plus their two young children. The family lived in THE BIG CITY Chicago and for them, living in BIG CITY Chicago was a stress-filled rat race. Traffic jams. Congested streets. No parking. No time. No good friends. Nobody knew each other on their cul de sac.*

*Like so many people, this young family dreamed of living in a small town, a small town of about 10,000 people. This was their dream, their vision, their preoccupation, to find jobs in some small town somewhere where life moved much more slowly, where there was more time to relax and be human and where they would actually have time to enjoy each other.*

*So George and Jean got onto the Internet and searched and searched for such a town. Finally, they found it – way south of Chicago, a small city by the name of Blairstown. They found job openings in that small town. And before you knew it, the Miller family had escaped from the rat race of BIG CITY Chicago and were now living their dream in their dream house in a small, slow paced city of 10,000 folks.*

*There were many nice features to the town of Blairstown that the Millers loved.*

*The slow pace of living was the best. You could ride your bike to work and go home for lunch. Can you imagine, riding your bike to work and not being killed by the busy traffic? And actually coming home for lunch? Talk about a dream come true.*

*People knew each other on the street, waved to each other and called each other by name. Not like in BIG CITY Chicago.*

*There was the peaceful river that meandered right through the center of the city. How people loved that river – to swim in it, to go fishing in it, go boating in it, to walk along the river. And during the winter season, they even had an ice rink on that frozen river and families would ice-skate under the lights at night. Everybody loved that beautiful river in Blairstown.*

*Also, people liked the large, magnificent, old, majestic Colonial homes. No, these weren't the ticky-tack houses which were built in mass after World War II. These were the great majestic homes that were built at the turn of the century.*

*And people like the Mainstreet of Blairstown. It had a beginning and an end, only three stop lights, with beautiful old stores that had been freshly painted and decorated. That section of town was called Old Town.*

*And people liked the central park. As is typical of most Midwest towns, Blairstown had a beautiful central park. Yes, it was in the center of the town – a well-groomed park with an abundance of flowers and shrubs and trees. The elm trees were tall and stately and even elegant in their beauty. It was absolutely lovely.*

*The newcomer George would walk through the park every day on his way to work and would walk home for lunch, always enjoying the beauty of this well manicured park. He loved everything about this park and noticed everything about it, including this unusual woman who always seemed to be there in this park – this elderly lady sitting or standing or walking in some part of the park.*

*At first, George didn't pay much attention to this lonely creature. Probably a coincidence, he thought to himself. But after a while he started to pay closer attention. He noticed that she was a very ordinary looking woman, not too tall, and not too short, not too fat, not too thin, just ordinary.*

*She wore a grey raincoat, with a grey scarf pulled around her face, grey glasses, a grey face and grey sad eyes. But what was extraordinary about her, was that she was in that park almost every day of the year, weather permitting.*

*Often during the day, he would see this grey lady standing looking out the highway that came into the city. She would look left down to one end of the Main Street and then she would look right to the other end of the Main Street. And then back to the double lane highway that came into the town.*

*George was perplexed. He started to ask himself, "Who is this woman? What is she doing in this park?" And at times when he walked down the center sidewalk, his eyes matched against her eyes, and there was a gaze inside of her eyes – a deep gaze – as if she were looking or waiting for someone. He was perplexed and finally his curiosity got the best of him.*

*So he went and cornered an "old timer" Harold Clark, one of the town natives, one of the old-timers, and he said, "Who is that woman?"*

*And "old timer" Harold said, "Oh, you mean the lonely lady of Blairstown Park." "Oh, I know all about her. I'll tell you the story. Do you have time?" The newcomer, George, now being more relaxed said, "I have time." So they both sat down on a park bench and the old timer told the following story.*

*Meanwhile, as the saga unfolded, the grey lady stood there, looking out at the highway that came into town, and then to the left down Main Street and then to the right down Main Street.*

*Harold began; "Her name is Grace - Grace Simon. Yes, she has spent a lot of time in this park in recent years. When she and Tom, her husband, first moved to town, they didn't have much money or anything. But soon, Tom was bursting with ambition and he bought the furniture store down at the end of Main Street. Within five years, he bought the funeral home down at the other end of Main Street.*

*Tom was as successful businessman as there was in Blairstown. Good family. Good wife. Three kids. Two businesses. Yep, they were doing well and everybody respected them.*

*"But doggone, cancer came and got Tom Simon. He was much too young. It was such a sad day. I remember it well, the day that Tom Simon passed away. Grace Simon, his wife, didn't have long to grieve. After all, she had to learn to run the businesses. And she did. And she was good at it – as good as Tom.*

*"The years passed and Grace turned 65, retired, and turned the two family businesses over to their two children, Steve and Stephanie. The third child, Frankie, the youngest, he died in a car accident out there in Colorado, as a young adult. So the two kids, Steve and Stephanie, inherited the two family businesses.*

*"Grace really helped those kids a lot at first. I mean, first they were her businesses and gradually she gave them to them. She really helped them. In fact, they couldn't have run those businesses – they wouldn't have had those businesses in the first place, if it hadn't been for Grace. No, those kids couldn't have made it without her.*

*"But then, they didn't want her around any more. Kind of a family feud, if you know what I mean.*

*"You see, that family feud all started one day when Grace got a letter from Denver, Colorado. Grace wouldn't tell anybody what was in that letter. But she sure did get all worked up about it.*

*She said to Steve and Stephanie that she had to have money, she had to get a plane ticket to go to Denver, Colorado, immediately. They thought their Mom had gone off her rocker – that she was half-cocked – that something was wrong with her. She said, "Steve and Stephanie, I have to have a ticket – I have got to go to Denver, Colorado." She wouldn't tell anyone – not a soul – what it was about."*

*"The kids finally broke down and they got her a plane ticket to Denver, Colorado. Well, as it turned out, that mysterious letter was from Frank. Frank!*

*Frank wasn't dead at all. Although, he might just as well have been.*

*“It turns out that Frank was in prison on several counts of armed robbery. He had been too ashamed to tell his mother, so he had one of his buddies write a letter home to his mother saying that he had been killed when his car had crashed through a bridge and plunged into the river. He even had him send a clipping from the Colorado newspaper that verified the story.*

*Anyhow, for some fool reason, Frank had decided to write and tell his mother the truth in THE letter. I don’t know why he did it. He should have just left things the way they were, but he insisted on writing that letter. It would have been better for Grace and for the family to think he was dead. Nobody wants a jailbird in the family.*

*Lots of people in this town would have liked to wring Frank’s neck for the stunt that he had pulled. Bad enough that he had run away from home and did all of those rotten things. Let him pay for it. But when he wrote his mother saying that he was dead, I mean that was the last straw. That was absolutely ridiculous. No use making poor Grace Simon suffer because of it.*

*But he did it anyhow. He sent that letter. I didn’t like it one bit to be honest. I remember that day. So Grace went out there. Grace went out to Denver, Colorado.”*

*“Now according to the best reports that we could piece together in a town our size – actually, we could piece the reports together very well to be quite honest. Now the best report we could pin together was that it was quite a scene in prison when Grace Simon and Frank first encountered each other.*

*They led Grace down a long hallway and into a waiting room with lots of other people. A pretty somber bunch, I bet. Then the guard took Grace into a small room just off the waiting room. He told her to wait there. Her son would be along. She waited for what felt like an eternity. Mind you, she hadn’t seen him for ten years. She wasn’t even sure that she would recognize him.”*

*“Then she heard his footsteps coming down the hallway. In the echo of the footsteps, she heard her heart pounding louder and louder. She looked up and there he stood in the doorway and their eyes froze – they froze, as their eyes met for the first time. They just stood there...silently.*

*"Grace moved first, as she always does. Grace moved first and she wrapped her arms around her son. She held him tightly and she cried and she cried and she cried – she cried her eyes out – old Grace did. She kept on saying - 'We thought you were dead – we thought you were dead - we thought you were dead' – she said over and over again.*

*"Finally, finally, Frank, too – Frank, at first had been standing kind of stiff there, and finally Frank, too, softened, wilted and embraced his mother and he held her, and he too started to cry. He cried his eyes out, just like a little baby.*

*"Whew – when things started to settle down, Frank and Grace talked a bit. She visited him several times during the two weeks that she was there in Denver and then she went out there every year after that for some years. Rumor has it that he was supposed to be ready for parole any day now.*

*"Anyway, she told him right off that when he gets out of prison that he should come home – that there was room enough for him to live with her. That he should come home to the family, to the town, to his old friends from the past.*

*"And that he could always be a partner in the family business. H-m-m-m – well –"*

*"Well, when she got back to Blairstown after that first visit to Denver, she was all excited. 'Franks alive, my boy's alive! All the accident business was all wrong. He's alive I tell you!' I heard her say that, I bet twenty times myself. I heard her say, 'My boy's alive! My boy's alive!' She was just like she was off her rocker, she was so excited about it."*

*"Well, she was about the only one though in Blairstown who was excited because the people in Blairstown had never had a native son stay in prison for thirty years for armed robbery before. People around here weren't too keen on the whole idea. Frank might have been alive after all, but Frank was a crook. A good-for-nothing crook who told his mom he was dead, but wasn't.*

*I mean, what are you supposed to say to a lady like that? 'Gee - I'm glad your son's alive and in prison?' What do you say? People in our town said nothing. It was kind of that embarrassment about old Frank."*

*“Now, Steve and Stephanie— now they weren’t quiet though. Steve and Stephanie had had enough. When Grace had told them that Frank wanted to come home, to disgrace them all, and their momma – that when she told him that he could be a part of the family business – THAT was the last straw. Steve and Stephanie were dumbfounded. – a crook in the family business? – imagine – in a town this size? – a crook in the funeral business? Selling furniture? It would never work.”*

*“Steve and Stephanie were right about that. The whole town agreed about that. No sireee – it wouldn’t work in Blairstown .and it wouldn’t work in the Lutheran Church in Blairstown. I mean, we all agreed on that.”*

*“Grace, of course, didn’t look at it that way. Frank was her son too, she argued. He had a right to be back in the family. So Grace had her view of the matter and the kids had another.*

*"And so, that’s the heart of the family feud.*

*"Every time Grace visited the furniture store or funeral home, she would talk about Frank coming back and being part of it all.*

*"Well, the kids, Steve and Stephanie decided to settle it legally. They had a lawyer draw up the papers to rule Frank out of the business altogether. When Grace protested – and Grace really protested, she made a stink about it –when Grace protested and protested she did – they told her that it was none of her business.*

*It was now their business and they could do what they wanted. AND that she was never to come into the stores again and pester them. The two kids actually put a restraining order on their own mother so she couldn't come into the stores again and pester them about Frank.*

*“I thought that was really unkind. Grace had given them the stores in the first place. She had helped them all those years and then to tell their mother that she couldn’t come back in the stores she had given them. To be honest, down deep inside, I felt that Steve and Stephanie went too far there. I didn’t think that was right and a lot of the people in town agreed with me on that one.*

*"And worse than that; they don't even invite Grace over to their homes anymore because all she does is talk about Frank. Every time they would invite her over to the house, all she would talk about was Frank. That would upset Steve and Stephanie. They don't even invite their Mom over to their house. Only at Christmas and Easter. Can you believe that?"*

*"She doesn't even get to see her grandchildren anymore unless they sneak over to the park to see her. And the little ones, that is exactly what they do. I've seen it many times – they sneak over to the park behind Steve and Stephanie's backs and they really like that Grandma. They really like Grace. That is the way grandkids always are, you know."*

*"George, you are a newcomer and so now you know that's why Grace Simon wanders alone in Blairstown Park. The Lonely Lady of Blairstown Park, that's what they call her. She's out there right now, watching and waiting."*

*"She looks down the highway. She is waiting for Frank to come home. She's waiting for Frank to come home, and rumor has it, good rumor, that he's out of the prison on parole and is coming home any day now. So she's watching that highway coming into town, watching for her boy to come back home."*

*"But, also, she's got her eyes on Main Street an awful lot of the time. She looks to one end of Mainstreet where the Funeral Home is and then to the other end of Main Street where the Furniture store is."*

*She's watching and waiting for Steve and Stephanie to change, watching for some sign of recognition, some sign of love, some softening of the heart, some sign of welcome from Steve and Stephanie."*

*George the newcomer finally interrupted the old timer: "You'd think that she wouldn't want anything to do with those two kids. What do you suppose Grace would do if those kids, Steve and Stephanie, did give out some sign of recognition, some change of heart?"*

*Now it was the old timer's turn to pause. The old timer scratched his head like this, thought for a minute and said, "You know, I think that Grace would do just like she did with Frank."*

*"When she saw Frank in prison for the first time and they stared, looked at each other, and she ran and threw her arms around Frank. She was bursting with happiness.*

*"And if Frank comes down that highway and comes home, at the first sight of him, Grace will be bursting again with happiness. Grace knows that Frank needs to come home, home to his family, home to his future. When she sees him come home, she will be SOOOO happy.*

*And if Steve and Stephanie changed their hearts and inner attitudes towards their brother, Grace would be SOOOO happy. And when they come to their senses – when they come to their senses, she's going to run and throw her arms around them and give them a great big love.*

*You know, that's just the way Grace **was** in the past. That's just the way Grace **is** today. That's the way Grace **will be** tomorrow. Yep, yep, that's true. That's just ... the way ... Grace ... is."*  
*Indeed, Grace is truly amazing.*

Amen.