

St. Matthew's Hillsborough  
4 Lent  
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Prodigal Love

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This sermon is about prodigal love, it highlights two poems and a prayer.

Actually, the two poems are a sequence of poems labeled Prodigal Poems. They are penned by Kilian McDonnell.

**Kilian McDonnell** is a monk. He is a Benedictine monk who is also a theologian. He is from Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. 100 years old, Brother Kilian did not begin writing poetry till he turned 75. (It's never too late to start something new!)

Among his recent poems is a trilogy on the prodigal son. It begins with the perspective of the prodigal, the younger son.

**The Younger Son**

*"So he set off and went to his father."--Luke 15:18*

The gold is gone, and the last  
tubercular floozie has stamped  
her foot, swished an angry  
skirt, and slammed the door.

Shame can wait, not hunger.  
I remember the mutton, the dates,  
uneaten in my father's pantry,  
and not a single sow in sight.

How hunger teaches the strategies of guilt;  
the husks of my father's swine  
are wise if you will listen.  
Famine is seeing, unveiling.

The stomach remembers the stories  
of lost things: drachmas  
swept from under the bed,  
sheep freed from the brambles.

**Remembering always has a twin,  
like the speaking mirror on the wall.**

**Why not a son who was dead,  
startled into life by memory.**

**repeat**

*And then the sequel to the younger son's reflection  
is his father's response:*

**Father of the Younger Son**

*"While he was still far off his father saw him."--Luke 15:20*

Even after I gave up  
keeping the tiger cub  
in his cage, I picked it up,  
forgetting snarls and claws,  
though I have bite marks,  
scratches to show love.

The years I do not count  
passing the window in the front,  
searching the road for signs  
of that cat no leash could check,  
unmuzzled, free, and bleeding.

The helpless ache is ordinary,  
the Thursday tedious, as I give a  
passing glance through the window  
at the dot on the far horizon, walking  
as many have walked before.

But the way he swings his arms,  
turns his head, slightly  
pigeon-toed. I am out the door,  
down the stairs, down the road,  
running, arms outstretched.

My embrace, my tears, my laughter  
gather in all the years,  
my kiss stops rehearsed  
genealogies of sin, outlawing of self.  
Of course, you are my son.

Be quick, steward, clothe him  
like the son of an Eastern king,  
the best robe from my chest,  
wake the cook, load  
the table with meats and wines

Call in friends and foes,  
blaze the night into day  
with torches, push the chairs  
against the wall, pluck the harps,  
strike the largest timbrel.

**When the dead come back you drink.  
When the lost are found you dance.**

**repeat**

The prodigal son parable is really about the prodigal father, one unbounded by the rules of society, the conventions of birth, legacy, or heritage. God is forever seeking, wanting, welcoming us back when we are undeserving, uncomprehending of either His greatness or His grace.

But what of the prodigal son who is a refugee? Today from Ukraine, yesterday from Afghanistan, or Syria, or Yemen, or Myanmar, or the Horn of Africa, or Xian Jiang in western China?

How do we pray for the victims of violence but also for the perpetrators? All are God's children, all will return to dust, ashes to ashes, as we remind ourselves repeatedly during Lent.

What makes Lent 2022 so different from other Lents is that we find ourselves already at the foot of the cross. It is as though we skipped all the intervening weeks leading to Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, and arrived at the hill where Jesus was crucified on Good Friday,

We pray to Jesus, today as we do every day, in and beyond Lent, but can we also pray for those who maligned him? For Judas who betrayed him, for Pontius Pilate who unjustly sentenced him, for the Roman soldier who stabbed him in the side?

I test myself constantly in Lent to remember the worst of times and to think how should I act as a servant of the one who served others, coming back to the Father as a prodigal son forgiving not just the older brother, whom I imagine to have been a bully, but all bullies and villains, all marauders and murderers? "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Think of the person who has hurt you most in life, and ask forgiveness not just for that person but for remembrance of the greatness of God that exceeds our human kindness.

Let me apply that lesson to myself. Not just the living but the dead. Can you remember an acquaintance or a relative who did you harm and whom you never forgave? I have such a relative, now deceased. Can you remember somebody at work who wrought havoc on you or someone dear to you? I have such a former colleague at Duke, also now deceased.

Whether alive or dead, here or gone, take a moment to remember some vile person unworthy of forgiveness, and then, digging deep in your heart, release that pain and try, try to forgive!

### Pause (painful but critical)

During Lent I find giving up – a dish, a habit, a pleasure - easier than giving more – of who I am, what I like, or what I treasure, not lingering on, but instead erasing, the **non**-forgiveness of pain or injury for past insults.

And then I think back to 9/11/01. Over two decades ago, the horror of that day is still raw as a scar on my conscience, a shadow in my memory. Why? I was asked to preach a sermon at St. Matthew's soon after: a member of the congregation had wanted me to set things right re Islam, sharing some good thoughts about good Muslims, of whom I know many. Instead, I found myself gravitating to a prayer for the bombers, the bad Muslims who had hijacked planes, committed atrocities in the name of Allah, killing many, too many innocent Americans on that horrific Tuesday. Where was God on 9/11? How could a merciful god countenance such violence carried out by those who claimed to be doing his will?

I find myself in Lent 2022 in the same state of awe, dismay and disbelief as I was on that not so distant fall Sunday in 2001.

One of the resources that guided me, and others, through that difficult period was a prayer penned by a survivor of the Holocaust. Anonymously crafted, the prayer was found in the Ravensbruck concentration camp at the end of World War II. It was found next to the body of a dead child. It reads:

*“O Lord, remember not only men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they inflicted on us. Remember the fruits we have born thanks to this suffering: our comradeship, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of this; and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits we have born be their forgiveness.”*

**Repeat:** *“let all the fruits we have born be their forgiveness.”*

Forgive those who have persecuted, injured and even killed innocent people?! My initial response is revulsion. My second response is rejection. This prayer stands as a challenge to every first reaction that I might have to those who wrong me. What about **my** need to assert **my** rights, **my** importance, to pray for **my** friends, **my** family and **my** country? When Jesus asks me and us to pray for those who persecute us, could he possibly mean even this? “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

And so the prodigal son looms as not only a daunting parable. It is also a haunting message. How do we preserve humanity and hope in the face of violence, death and destruction? Jesus offers a way that is prodigal, the prodigal love of God for all who seek to come home, even if they have no physical home, even if every semblance of a normal world has been erased, removed for them by the dastardly acts of others, but at the same time to remember those dastardly others who have deprived them, who have destroyed their homes, killed their relatives, their friends and their fellow citizens.

Let me be clear. I am not sure that I am worthy of this challenge: to pray for my enemies or those so evil that they seem beyond remembrance, much less repair? I can say the words but can I pray the prayer? Can I pray it from the bottom of my heart, with conviction? "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

We are now in the wilderness of Lent. Suspended from normal time, God calls us yet again to examine, reflect and project our deepest commitments as Christians. We remain worshippers of a prodigal father, one unbounded by rules of society, conventions of privilege, self-interest, normality. May He welcome us back, and give solace to all refugees but also forgiveness to those who persecute refugees, though we know not the mystery of His greatness nor the vastness of His grace. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Each day during Lent and throughout the year, we are asked to pray for prodigal love, and so I ask you today to bow your heads and pray this prayer with me:

*Father of Jesus, make me brave, bold, and effective in forgiveness towards those who have driven others into exile, loneliness and despair. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," especially those who seem beyond forgiveness by all standards of decency, humanity, or equity. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." In the name of your Son, the vessel of your prodigal love for each and all of us, today and always. Amen.*