**“From our Fears”** Rev. Phillip J. Romine  
Third Sunday of Lent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church   
Luke 13:1-9; Isaiah 55:1-9 Saint Paul, Minnesota  
March 23, 2025

Ryan Burge is an American political scientist, statistician, and for 17 years until the Summer of 2024, an *American Baptist* pastor. An associate professor at Eastern Illinois University, he is best known for his work on religion in the United States. *60 Minutes* has termed him one of *the “leading data analysts on religion and politics”* within the United States.

For example, Burge has argued that *non-religious voters* represent a growing force in politics. His research finds that the majority of *“nones”* have *religion-like beliefs* and believe in some conception of a *higher power,* despite not affiliating with a religion. Burge has also argued that the term *“evangelical”* is becoming associated with *politics,* particularly that of conservatism, rather than its traditional association with adherence to *evangelical theology.*

Anyway, Burge writes a twice weekly blog on Substack that I follow, and this past Monday his blog title was, *“Who Are Filling Up the Pews: Highly Educated Parents.”*He starts by asking the question: *Who are the people most likely to be regular church attenders?* Answer: *Older educated folks.* Specifically, people in their mid-50s and up who have college degrees.

Conversely, the least likely group to attend church are *those who are younger and have a lower level of education.* Someone who is between the ages of 18-35 and only finished high school is about *half* as likely to be a regular attender as someone who is in their late fifties with a graduate degree.  
  
In addition, Burge looked at the impact of being a parent on church attendance. *Result?* A parent was about *10 points more likely* to be a regular attender than a non-parent.

Conversely, for childless people, *70%* report *never* attending religious services. It was 54% of people who had children of any age. For people who had children *under the age of 1,* 29% were attending at least once a month. That was the highest percentage in Burge’s analysis. But the other big takeaway is that folks who have kids (of any age) are *significantly more likely* to be a regular attender than someone who doesn’t have children in that same age bracket.

Burge also found that *there are three demographic factors* that make one *less likely* to attend religious services at least 12 times a year. They were: *being male, having a higher income, and being white.* In terms of magnitude, *being white* was the most predictive variable in the negative direction. Said plainly: holding a bunch of other things constant, *a white person is about 33% less likely to be a regular attender than a person of color.*Conversely, what factors drive up attendance? *Education, age, and having children.* In other words, people with a *college degree* are more likely to attend compared to those with a high school diploma. *Older people* are more likely to attend than younger people and *people with children* attend with a higher frequency than those who don’t. But, says Burge, … *parental status* has the largest overall positive effect on attendance.

Look around. Do you see yourselves in those statistics?

Why am I sharing this with you? Because *who we are* (who we understand ourselves to be) determines not only *how we practice our religion* but, more specifically, *how we interpret biblical texts.* And today’s text, *the Parable of the Prodigal Son,* is a case in point.

Ask yourself: *Do you ever worry that churches are too full of people who are not disappointments?* I do.

Bear with me here. I love the story of the Prodigal Son. I love the idea that no matter what we do in life, no matter how much we mess up, God will still welcome us when we decide to come home.

This week’s Gospel text is the story of a son who asks for his inheritance early, goes off to the big city, and promptly hits rock bottom. He is so afraid of how his father will be ashamed of him that he takes a job feeding pigs for a stranger. One day out in the fields, hungry and humiliated, he realizes that even his father’s hired hands are treated better than this. So he sets off for home, expecting no welcome but hoping for just enough grace to be treated fairly as a servant, not a son. He is, after all, *a disappointment.*

But many times as I've heard this text preached about in a sermon (or preached it myself), *something strange has happened:* the story of the Prodigal Son has become the story of the Prodigal Son's Brother.

This may have something to do with the churches I've found myself at along the way. More often than not these parishes have been filled with the sort of responsible brothers and sisters who pay the bills on time, call their parents regularly, and change the oil in the car long before the light goes off*. In short, these are the people who have never been disappointments.*

These are the sort of folks who can resonate with the *angry brother* who has stayed and worked on the farm while his younger brother wasted the family's money in the city. And now that same brother is home again, and dad just can't wait to give him another chance.

*Except that's not exactly true.* The reality is that even when we look like we have our lives together, even when we look to all the world like the loyal son or daughter, we have all been disappointments at one time or another. We have been prodigal sons who have hit some kind of rock bottom*. Maybe no one knew it but us, but we knew it.* And it shook us to our core.

The reality is that both brothers live inside of us, the responsible one and the prodigal one. *It is an uneasy coexistence* made worse by the reality that neither is perfect, and that both make real mistakes. The dutiful brother's lack of compassion and grace when his brother returns is indeed worth our attention. *But he's not the only one.*

Of all the places in our life, *church* should be the one place where we can all admit that we are sometimes the other brother, too. Even when others admire *the highlight reels of our lives,* each of us knows that there is a lot sitting back there on the cutting room floor. We need a place where we can *say that* and *hear it* from others too.

So many of us, even those of us with good jobs and impressive résumés, walk around thinking that we are disappointments to someone we love. Too often, not even our churches let us be the fallen brother who desperately wants to come home. Too often, even in the one place where we should be able to confess our failings and be honest with ourselves, we have to play the part of the one whose greatest sin is his desire for fairness.

Most preachers know how to proclaim *grace* to the prodigals. *"It's OK,"* we keep saying, "God knows what you have done, but you are forgiven. All you need to do is come home and accept the forgiveness that is waiting for you." We can make those words sing for those who have screwed up their lives, *but what does the gospel say to the elder brother who spends his life playing by the rules?*

It is tempting to make him into a bigger sinner than he is. But it's a mistake to conflate the elder brother with the prodigal. *They have different roles in the story,* and the role of the elder brother is to demonstrate *the dilemma* of those who don't know how to get into the arms of the father that are outstretched to prodigals.

According to Craig Barnes, President Emeritus of Princeton Seminary, the sins of the elder brothers are, well, *boring.* Said Barnes, when one of them comes to see me claiming to want to make a confession, I usually hear, *"I have agreed to coach my daughter's soccer team because no one else would, and we will be moving my aging mother-in-law into our back room, and the church's tutoring program for inner city children is expanding way beyond our expectations—so would it be OK if I didn't chair the stewardship committee next year?"*

Barnes asked, *"That's it? That's your idea of a confession? I can do better than that. Let's change seats."*

So it doesn't really work to try to convince elder brothers to act like prodigals. *They're just terrible at it.*

Scripture makes it clear that repentance is a necessary response to the good news of the gospel. *But of what do the righteous repent?*

According to scripture, *sin* is anything that keeps us from God. So as odd as it sounds, the elder brother has to repent of *the righteousness* that is keeping him from needing Jesus.

*But it is much harder to repent of being good.* The elder brother has been rewarded his whole life for getting *an A* on every test, and he knocks himself out to earn this stellar transcript.

But when he comes to *church,* he or she hears that in the end it's a *pass/fail test,* and the only way to pass is to receive the grace of God. *"It's not about what you achieve, but what you receive."* When I say these things in a sermon, the elder brothers cock their heads like faithful dogs do *when they're confused.*

Over the years I've learned that the elder brother has another besetting sin, which is *anxiety.* Prodigals don't stay awake all night fretting that they haven't done enough. *That's the burden of those who carefully try to construct life*. When can anyone do enough? *Anxiety always tags along behind the drive to do well*. The Bible has plenty to say about the perfect love of God that alone casts out fear. We can never be *rationally convinced* to give up anxiety. It's an emotion, and only the emotion of God can get rid of it.

In the parable, the elder brother seems anxious about the fuss made over the return of his brother. The subtext of that worry is that he doesn't feel appreciated. Yet his carefulness and propriety make him uncomfortable with his father's passion.

Friends, in Lent we get honest about the fact that we sometimes disappoint God. The good news is that we also get to hear the truth: *God is waiting to come running down the road and welcome us back.* Dutiful son, prodigal son, or a little bit of both...God knows us already, and God can't wait for us to come home.