

Ordinary Time 10, Year C: *What Next, Oh Most-Prodigal-One?*

4pm Jazz Vespers Service at St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church

With the Laura Crema & Seraphina Crema Black

Luke 15:11-32 (NRSVue)

The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

¹¹ Then Jesus^[a] said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled his stomach^[b] with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to his senses he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’^[c] ²² But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so

that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹ Then the father^[d] said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Song: *No More Blues*

Reflection I, Move I: The Hero’s Journey on the Altar of the Capitalist God

It has been said that one can know a society by the gods they worship or by the hero stories they tell. Like St. Paul standing in front of the Areopagus of Athens, proclaiming to the Athenians bustling in the market square around him, “...I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way,”¹ we too, stand in a society that is inundated with stories of gods and heroes. Here’s some numbers for you. Already seven-and-a-half months into 2025, we’ve seen seven blockbuster superhero movies placed on the altar of the capitalist god. There’s a lesser known, but emerging pantheon, that chronicles the hero’s journey on the silver screen: *Kraven the Hunter*, *Dog Man*, *Thunderbolts*, *The Old Guard 2*, these films stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the already canonized deities of industry; films like *Captain America: Brave New World*, *Fantastic Four: First Steps*, (and yet another) *Superman* movie. While

¹ Acts 17:22 (NSRVue)

some may say, “*No More Blues*,” others may say, “no more superhero movies!” But perhaps these seven aren’t quite enough for the superhero fan. Looking forward to late July and on, 2025 cinema-attendees can look forward to seven more Hollywood films to be released as the year goes on: *X-Men: First Class Reborn*, *Spider-Man: Beyond the Spider-Verse*, *Green Lantern Corps*, *Red Sonja*, *Blade*, *The Batman: Part II*, and *Wonder Woman: Rebirth*. That’s a total of 15 new superhero movies just from the North American film industry alone. This piqued my curiosity, so I kept doing some further digging about our consumption, our propensity, to hear and tell such stories. Interestingly, The Guardian reports that there were 316 superhero movies produced between the years 1966-2023, by using a series of conservative estimates and measuring parameters.² This number, while high in one respect, seemed low in another, so I continued to dig further. Another internet source, using slightly broader metrics, suggested that around 1,149 superhero movies had been produced by the North American film industry in that same time frame.³ 1,149 superhero films. “North Americans,” I can already hear St. Paul say, “I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way,” for on the altar of consumption, we place countless resources, hours, and imagination.

² https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/nov/01/superhero-movies-black-panther-captain-marvel?utm_source=chatgpt.com

³ https://www.listchallenges.com/every-superhero-movie?utm_source=chatgpt.com

While on the one hand, the excess is staggering, on the other it speaks to a fundamental part of the human condition: the need to tell stories that help us transcend present reality. Writing in 1949, Professor Joseph Campbell of Sarah Lawrence College, department of comparative mythology and religion, pioneered the idea of the universal Hero's journey archetype in his celebrated book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). By surveying global mythologies, religious texts, and aural traditions, Campbell suggested that a universal Hero's Archetype exists in all human societies. Campbell's ideas were further refined when Hollywood development executive Christopher Vogler adapted the main concepts of *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* into his 2007 novel called *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structures for Writers*. Through these two works, the concept of the Hero's Journey, while ancient and universal in origin, has gained traction in concept and terminology amongst artists, industry, and consumers alike. Vogler suggests that there are twelve stages of the Hero's Journey, that occur in some combination or series of subversion.

The 12 Stages of the Hero's Journey (as popularized by Christopher Vogler):

1. **The Ordinary World:** The hero is introduced in their familiar, everyday life.
2. **The Call to Adventure:** The hero is presented with a challenge or invitation to leave their ordinary world.
3. **Refusal of the Call:** Initially, the hero may hesitate or refuse the adventure.
4. **Meeting the Mentor:** A wise figure or guide appears to offer advice, training, or supernatural aid.
5. **Crossing the Threshold:** The hero commits to the journey and enters the special world, leaving the familiar behind.

6. **Tests, Allies, and Enemies:** The hero faces trials, makes allies, and encounters adversaries in the special world.
7. **Approach to the Inmost Cave:** The hero prepares for the major challenge or confrontation.
8. **The Ordeal:** The hero confronts their greatest fear or faces a major crisis.
9. **The Reward (Seizing the Sword):** The hero overcomes the ordeal and gains a reward, such as a treasure, knowledge, or a new understanding.
10. **The Road Back:** The hero begins the journey back to the ordinary world, facing potential obstacles.
11. **Resurrection:** The hero faces a final test or confrontation, often a symbolic death and rebirth.
12. **Return with the Elixir:** The hero returns to the ordinary world, transformed by their experiences and sharing their newfound knowledge or gift.⁴

Reflection I, Move II: What Next, Oh Most-Prodigal-One?

Now, always the Pastor, I want to object to any list that claims to be comprehensive or complete. But I really do feel that there's something critical missing here: step 13, readjusting to the ordinary world. Oh Athenians, how we love stories that go *BANG*, *KAPOW*, and suddenly the villain lies at the feet of justice. How we love stories where the two romantic interests fall in love, evoking our chorus of *ahhhhs*. How we love stories that subvert tropes and narratives: the villain wins, and love does not prevail. These too, please our pattern-loving brains. But stories that talk about readjusting to home? They're just not quite as interesting. Few people, for example, want to watch a movie about a superhero that faces situational depression after they save the city, knowing that they'll never quite face

⁴Source: Reedsyblog. <https://blog.reedsy.com/guide/story-structure/heros-journey/#:~:text=Google-.What%20is%20the%20Hero's%20Journey?,the%20Mentor:%20A%20teacher%20arrives.>

the same high again. The cape goes up, and the scotch comes out. Or what about a movie about a hero that feels such social isolation and overwhelm from being discovered that they decide to give it up all together? Or what about a movie about a superhero that wasn't able to save the woman on the train tracks, or the child from the flying car and is now wracked by night terrors? Such movies would not generate the dollars that Hollywood needs to justify creating yet another film.

But in the Christian faith, this is exactly what we are invited to focus on. Consider the story of the Prodigal Son. Perhaps you know this story from Jesus. A younger son, eager to go and experience the world, asks his Father for his inheritance. This act ruptures the relationship with the Father. As Father Henri Nouwen notes in *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Meditation on Fathers, Brothers, and Sons*, the Prodigal, our hero, violates his culture by asking for his inheritance, indicating that he wishes his Father to die so that he can receive his share of the wealth.⁵ Our hero, already fallen by his actions, goes out travelling, “squandering his property in dissolute living,”⁶ as the Bible says. Eventually, this doesn't turn out well for him. Far from him, disconnected from his family, this young Jewish is forced to take a job caring for pigs, so hungry that he even eats the same slop placed before them. Unclean internally from the heat of wishing his father dead, unclean

⁵ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 32.

⁶ Luke 15:13 (NRSVue)

externally from living with the pigs, and unclean spiritually from contact with ritually unclean animals, our fallen hero returns to the only place he knows might accept him: home.

Now each of us has a different relationship to home and to our parents, but if you're anything like me I'm not even sure I would consider going home if I was in such a poor state after having wished death upon my parents. But our hero, fallen as he is, is not remembered as the Prodigal for nothing. "Father," he exclaims, "I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."⁷ The air is tense. The son knows what he has coming to him. Retribution at worst, a chance to work his way up on the family farm at best. But the Father has other plans. "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him," orders the father to a house slave, "put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"⁸ As the celebration begins to get underway, the elder son, working in the fields, hears the sounds coming from the house over yonder. After asking a slave about the commotion coming from the house, anger pours over him – as an eldest son myself, I can feel my own anger rise alongside his. "How could this twerp - who wished their father dead, who reduced

⁷ Luke 15:21 (NRSVue)

⁸ Luke 15:23-24 (NRSVue)

the family estate, causing him to have to work harder for even less - deserve anything but their father's wrath?" he wondered, as he saw his father's figure approach him in the field. "Son," says the compassionate Father, "you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.""⁹ And just like that, Jesus ends his story. There's no clean resolution to the story, no telling of reconciliation between the brothers, no telling of the hero's re-entry into family life, or of what happened to the eldest son's righteous indignation. The final step, step 13, readjusting to the ordinary world, is once again, not disclosed here. So, what next, oh most-Prodigal-one? The story rests with us – we who hear the story, and recognize ourselves in the positions of parent, prodigal, and eldest son.

Interlude: *Angel Space; In a Mellow Tone*

Reflection II, Move III: Jazz Visions of Home

At its core, the jazz tradition also has important commentary on the Hero's Journey, and the core theme of returning home. Like the Greek Philosopher Heraclitus proclaiming that, "you can't step in the same river twice," the jazz tradition deeply embodies the wisdom of leaving from home, never to return the

⁹ Luke 15:31-32 (NRSVue)

same again. “You can never place the same tune twice,” an elder of the jazz scene once told me. Like the Hero’s journey, the jazz musician takes the tune and interprets it anew each time, pouring over cliché and subversion to create something that is both old and yet new. Yet, unlike the Hero’s journey that is often unconcerned with the return home, the jazz tradition, like the Jesus tradition, is deeply concerned with integration. The jazz tradition wants us to come back over, and over again, stretching our hearts, minds, ears, bodies, and souls, to hear a word that feeds us life *and then to share it with others*. Like the Jesus tradition, the jazz tradition wants us to hear a transcendent word, a transcendent story, and then put it into action in our lives. The jazz tradition is concerned with the post-gig high and the blues that follow thereafter. The jazz tradition is concerned that we hear the music of hope and work for the social betterment of our fellow human beings. The jazz tradition demands that we confront dissonance, and integrate it, so that we emerge as deepened humans with greater emotional capacity that moves us toward the furtherance of love. This is rooted, in part, in the influence of the Gospel on this music, and in part by the influence of the Black American pioneers of this art form, who faced the prejudice of their day through self and communal expression in song. But like the Christian tradition, what began as a shared experience of a

certain people at a certain time and place in history, has expanded to become a worldwide phenomenon that invites all people in through the power of story.

Reflection II, Move IV (Conclusion):

So regardless of whether you love superhero movies or not, whether you're a Christian or not, whether you love jazz or not (even if it pains me), I invite you to the integrative work of the hero as they return home. At times we are the hero. At times we are the jaded eldest son. Other times, we are the prodigal seeking home, and then yet again we can be in the make-or-break position of the father. But wherever we find ourselves on the hero's journey, I would invite you to think about a Jesus or jazz-inspired ethic that calls us to carry the load with those who walk the way with us. We return to these stories, these myths, these literary and cinematic tropes repeatedly, because somehow, deep beneath the excess of Hollywood, we find something that rouses our spirits and invites us to see the world differently. When we take a multi-faceted lens of approach, we can begin to see ourselves in the places of each of the characters of these stories – and a Jesus-inspired ethic wants us to share the load of those we walk alongside with compassion and grace. The blues, I remind you, is a call-and-response format, echoing the Gospel itself. May we each have the courage of the hero to go forth, and the grace to accept one another in our comings and goings from home.

Song: *500 Miles High*
