

THURSDAY BIBLE STUDY

Thursday: One Faith – Bible Study, September 1 Rev. Grace Imathiu

Conference Video: <http://worldmethodistconference.com/wp-content/uploads/wmc2016-videos/Wmc16-thursbiblestudy-imathiu-v2-1.m4v>

August 1976 I was a teenager in Nairobi, Kenya. My mother and father left for Dublin, Ireland to attend the 13th World Methodist Conference. On their return my mother told us that she had learned something new. She had learned that a woman's title need not to reflect her marriage status. A woman need not be Miss if she was single or Mrs. if she was married. There was an alternative akin to men's Mister. And my mother declared that from then on she would be called, Ms. We were shocked, after all a woman came with was two flavors, either married, or single. The married woman was a good woman and the single woman was a dangerous woman. And I had decided, thanks be to God, with my call into Ministry, I would always be Reverend neither Miss or Ms. My mother talked about the Ms. and my sisters and brother and I looked at each other in silence and we decided the World Methodist Conference gatherings were dangerous places. August 1981, I was in university, my mother and father left for Honolulu, USA to attend the 14th World Methodist Conference. On their return, my mother told us that she had learned something new. Oh oh! In his lecture she told us, Professor James Stone, had revealed that God is Black. We were shocked! Everybody, even the little school children knew that in the entire first century, Palestine Israeli Jesus was the only white skin blue eyed blonde Jewish man! We even had a picture of Scandinavian Jewish Jesus on the church wall. And my sisters and I looked at each other in silence and we decided that the Methodist, World Methodist Conference Gatherings were dangerous places we couldn't wait to go. Imagine our delight when we learned that the next World Methodist Conference would be held in Nairobi, Kenya and that the first African would be installed as the chair of that council. And it would be the first World Methodist Conference to be held outside of the western world. Dad was then installed chair of the council which was akin with being the Pope of Methodists. At that 15th World Methodist Conference I had two jobs. My first job was to make sure that I picked up all my father's papers at the end of each day. And my second job was being part of the Kenyan Hospitality Team. I was part of delivering all the giants into their hotels at the end of the day. Imagine, I rubbed shoulders with the giants of the Methodist, Wesleyan and Uniting traditions. imagine I rubbed shoulders with Eddie Foxx and Mary Nell. Imagine I rubbed shoulders with Maxie Dunham. Imagine I rubbed shoulders with Donald English and Bertha. Imagine I rubbed shoulders with Joe Hale and Mary. Imagine I rubbed shoulders with Bishop William R. Cannon. Imagine I rubbed shoulders with Bishop Leontine Kelly. Remember I rubbed shoulders with Bishop Ming and Edith Ming. I rubbed shoulders with Sir Alan Walker. Oh my goodness that was a dangerous World Methodist Conference. At that conference Bishop Tutu took the stage by storm and said apartheid must go! And at that conference Bishop Peter Storey added fire to the conference by saying that indeed apartheid must go. It was Black Lives Matter in South Africa! The following year Bishop Imathu led a delegation to meet with President P. W. Botha of South Africa to advocate the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the end of the racist system. I tell you World Methodist Conference gatherings are dangerous places. 1991 the next one I was promoted to being a delegate. First time that the conference met in Asia, in Singapore. And my world was turned upside down. I was visibly moved when I sat there and heard Donald English from England. Visibly moved to tears as he expressed penitence for the racist and imperialist attitudes of white western people like himself. His tears shook me to my core. It was the first time I saw and heard a white person critique white

privilege. And it was then that I understood clearly that privilege of any kind harms both the one who is a victim and the perpetrator. Both are prisoners, both the guard and the jailer. Oh I could go on to Rio... first time in South America. I could go on but I will hopscotch and skip to Houston. Here We Are One. United as one in Christ. It is because of Jesus' final prayer request for us who love and follow him. Jesus could have prayed for anything. He could have prayed for us to get richer. He could have prayed for us to live longer. But he prayed for us to be one as the witness that God sent Jesus. And the witness is not on how big our church buildings are, or how polished our sermons are. The witness is our being one. In a collection of essays edited by Donald Messer, the writers there continue to challenge us that disunity among Christians is sin. As contrary to Christ's will for his disciples. That disunity among Christians is scandalous. That disunity among Christians is a stumbling block for the world. And if you can't hear Jesus' prayer then some of the writers tell us to listen to John Wesley sermon "The Catholic Spirit." I'm a storyteller so this morning our Bible study is on a story. It is on the most familiar of Jesus' stories. This story is about one, and the one is the one who is the father in the story. And that one is the one who unites the family. The family is not united because they have the same hobbies or think alike. They are one because they share the same father. No matter what happens in the parable keep your eye on the one. We're going to hear these parables read in some of the languages of our gathering. And I'll asked you if you recognize or know the language that is being read please stand. And then you will sit. So that if you hear a language and you understand that language or know what language that is you will stand where you are for the reading of the Gospel. And then you will hear it in German, you will hear it in Hindi, you will hear it in Spanish, you will hear it in Romanian, Swahili, English. And so hear the parable read to us in the languages all of our gathering of one, as we hear the gospel according to Luke in chapter 15.

(Different languages are spoken)

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 property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

(Different languages are spoken)

The word of God for the people of God. So Jesus told a parable about a family. The parable began with a very simple... A man had two sons, nothing extraordinary about that, nothing unusual, nothing particularly interesting. A very simple parable about a man, who had two sons. An ordinary family and to tell you the truth, nothing earth-shattering happens: son behaves like sons often behave and the father behaves the way the book on good parenting says a father should behave. And yet scholars tell us that this very ordinary story is the best-known and best-loved of all Jesus' parables. One scholar calls this parable, "Jesus' Masterpiece." The parable moves, even seasoned Greek, and stuffed-out exegesis of the Bible when writing about this parable. Scholars sway from their so-called scientific value-free objective approach and they become remarkably tender. One exegete says this Parable is the most exquisite and penetrating of all stories of divine mercy and love. And that great African ancestor of the church, Saint Augustine of Hippo, he confesses that he was moved to tears by the story of the younger son. St. Augustine writes in his confessions "this story is about me. I who had squandered the gifts of intelligence. And on being a word seller, I squandered God's gifts and on fruitless readings in a wholesome text which I fed on, but it was like feeding on husks of hogs. Instead of being nourished, I became weaker. It amazes me that such a familiar simple plain and basic story could have such a profound effect.

Now our tradition has not done us any favor by giving the parable the popular title “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” The parable did not originally come with a title. Let it be noted that I am not against titles. After all titles are often helpful. However, titles can sometimes become harmful and even dangerous especially for a good story. A title can put a good story in a cage and mislead us into thinking just because we have given it a title, we know everything there is to know about it. A title is dangerous because it leads us into seeing a complicated story as though it is a single narrative. Titles can make us lazy. And incompetent and complacent until we don't listen to the story anymore. After all, we know it from the title. But a good story will not be caged. A parable is a parable precisely because it will not be managed. Show me a managed parable and I'll show you a dead parable. My Australian friend Cameron Simmons writes great poetry. Cameron's poem is a great definition of a parable and I emailed him and I asked him if could I use that poem? He gave me permission. It goes like this.

“This poem is untitled. This poem has no title. This poem wants no title. This poem rebels against any appropriate visible and or logical title that you may happen to think of. The first line of this poem is not to be supplemented as a title. It is not even to be referred to as The Poem that is Untitled or Untitled. It is to have no name, heading, or abbreviated term or reference. And this poem holds the God-given right to remain untitled. If it is to be referred to, it is to be recited in its entirety and read with all sincerity. This poem is untitled. It is never to be titled and it shall not ever have a title. And this poem also reserves the right to be to peter out.”

Jesus told a parable about a family a parable without a title but tradition has assigned the title the “Parable of the Prodigal Son” which has stuck although it is hardly accurate. You see, that title is problematic because it shifts attention from the family and privileges one member as though the whole parable is about that one member. But this is a Jesus' parable. This is not Hollywood or Nollywood or Bollywood production. This is not as if there has to be one star and everybody else is the supporting cast. Real families don't work that way. Families are much more complex than one story. And to reduce a family into a single story is a dangerous thing. The parable is about one. The parable is about holding all stories in tension. The parable is not about sweeping some stories under the carpet and pretending the stories are out of sight and out of mind. This is a parable about one family. And in the Jesus' parable the younger son decides to leave home. I beg you, leaving home is not a problem in the parable. The problem is how he left home.

Staying home can sometimes be a problem. Staying home sometimes can be painful. Leaving home is not the problem, it is how he left home. People in the Bible leave home all the time. Sarah and Abraham left home in their retirement season. So leaving home is not a problem. It is how he left home. Leaving home in our world today immigration is among the top issues of our time. Immigration is about leaving home. Now we are not told why he left. You can speculate on why he left. Maya Angelou writes that the younger son was seeking the kind of company he could not get home so he left. And some of us might speculate on sibling rivalry playing a major role. And some of us, especially as we celebrate the assembly, and as we celebrate Clergywomen Global Gathering, this parable some might read it closely and say there are no mothers or grandmothers, sisters in this parable... the macho level would drive anybody out. Now, this story of leaving home, the younger son packed everything he owned. And he left in a way that tells us he was not planning to return. He would not even come back for his father's funeral. After all, he has spoken in a way that leads us to see he buried his father alive. He packed everything; his cell phone, his leather jacket, his sunglasses, his sleek hair gel, his comb, his lucky marble, a change of underwear. And what he could not take with him he perhaps gave it to the servants, unto the poor.

He closed his bank account. He shredded the debit card. He had to talk with his old man and he said dad, it's like this, I talked to the lawyers and being the younger of the two boys a quarter of the property

would be legally mine when you die. Dad I can't hang around for you to die, so, can we pretend you're dead already? And believe it or not, the old man did not slap his young son. The old man divided his property between his two sons. Writing on this parable, Kenneth Bailey pays attention to the culture of this text and he writes, "the younger son requests his inheritance while his father is still alive and in good health. In traditional Middle Eastern culture this means father I am eager for you for you to die. This young son makes a request that is unthinkable particularly in Middle Eastern culture. If the father is a traditional middle-eastern father he would strike the boy across the face and drive him out of the house. The surprise of the story for Jesus' first hearers would be that the father does not refuse the outrageous insulting request. The father grants his younger son the freedom to own and to sell his portion of the estate." He sold it. He sold it! He gave of his father's land to another family. This is horrendous! He is moving the family boundary. This is terrible! He is making the family's inside problems public knowledge. He is shaming the family before the entire community. Now, Jewish law of the first century we are told, provided the division of inheritance when the father was ready to make such a division but it did not grant the children the right to sell until after their father's death. Among this, we are told that in the writings of Jerusalem Talmud and in the Dead Sea Scrolls it is known that the Jewish communities of the time of Jesus had a method of punishing a boy who lost the family inheritance to gentiles. There was a ceremony called the qetsatsah ceremony. In this ceremony we are told that they would take a large earthenware jar like this one. And they would fill it with grain and burned nuts and if that boy dared to return they would take this and throw it on the ground and say, so and so is cut off from his family. And at that point the village would have nothing to do with this wayward lad. It was a total ban on any contact with this violator of the village code of honor. I tell you society has to protect itself because first it is your son, and next thing it is my son next and so there is the qetsatsah ceremony. If you plan to break the rules, don't come back. This young son surprises me. He has no fear of the qetsatsah ceremony. It looks as though he plans to be gone for good. The old man divided his property. I can see him walking to the farm and drawing the line in the sand and saying, "These three acres are yours and these three acres are your older brother's." I can see them going to the cattle and the sheep and saying, "These 43 sheep and 8 goats are yours and those 129 sheep and goats are your brother's." And I can see him saying: "I'll keep this skinny calf for myself. I'll fatten it and your brother can kill it for his wedding or for when the neighbors come for my funeral". The text tells us that it took the younger son only a few days. It is as if he couldn't wait to get out fast enough. As if he couldn't wait to get out of dodge. I think he might have been afraid of his older brother's judgemental eye. Maybe the older brother had no sense of fashion or maybe the other brother thought an unaccompanied woman in public must be a problem. And this older brother seems to be jealous of his carefree younger brother and exaggerates. But the younger brother says goodbye and he crosses off away from his father's jurisdiction. He enters gentile land where folks do things differently. They even have a pig farm and they have bacon and ham and pork chops on the menu.

Food is cultural. Food is religious. Food can tell you a lot about someone. If you really want to get emotional and charged we can talk about food. Let me do a quick survey. I want you to stand up so that you show you are not ashamed. Stand up if you have ever eaten frogs' legs. Oh, oh! You better sit down! Let's take it to the next level. On your feet, if you have ever eaten snails, escargot. Aw! oh! Sit! Sit. This could divide us. On your feet if you have eaten termites. Sit, sit, please! On your feet you have eaten the stinkiest fruit known to human, the durian. Oh, please! Food, food speaks the language of hospitality and food, you know we are so heated up about human sexuality, but food can, food, the first early church controversies were around food. In fact, the first World Methodist Conference held in Acts, ended up in a food fight. Food is powerful. Ask the oldest son and he will tell you that food is political. That his problem was about food, the table: who eats what, where, and when, and who eats with who. No wonder Jesus gave us food as a means of grace. The bread and the cup so that we don't get used to the pig pods of life. This story, this story of the younger son leaving home sometimes you do have to leave home and he

does, we're not told why but we are concerned about how he left home. We're concerned about how he left home. And the text is deliberate. It says no one gave him anything.

He falls on hard times and he comes up with a plan. And the plan fails. He comes up with a second plan that plan fails. And he comes up with a third plan on how he will go home and become a hired hand. But how will he convince his father to trust him once more? The text says he comes to his senses, he came to himself says another translation, he got smart, says another translation and he comes up with a prepared confession. And now before you hurry up and think that he is being repentant, I want to tell you: 'eyes off him.' It's not about him, it's about the father. It's about the One. If you were the first audience, Bailey tells us, Jesus' first audience of Pharisees who knew the scripture well, would have recognized this younger son's confession as a quotation from Pharaoh, when Pharaoh tries to manipulate Moses into lifting the plagues. After the ninth plague Pharaoh finally agrees to meet Moses and when Moses appears Pharaoh gives a very similar speech like the one the younger son gives. I don't trust this younger son. Just like I don't trust the older son. I don't trust his confession because it might be an attempt to soften his father's heart. He plans to give his father a solution to a problem. This could work if it was a servant before a master. But he forgets, he forgets it is his father's broken heart we are dealing with. He thinks he will save himself through the law, that no grace is necessary. He feels like he can manage to talk himself into his father's house. Again he forgets this is going to be a matter of grace. You see, the lost money is not the real problem. The real problem is his father's broken heart and the rejected love that his father has endured. His problem is he is hungry. He remembers the qetsatsah ceremony and braces himself to end in shame. He will give a humble speech he tells himself and he practices. "I will give a humble speech that will touch my father's heart." On that painful road back, he is hungry but his father is also hungry for relationship. An old man sees his younger son coming. I don't know how he recognized him, but the old man recognizes him. Because there is nothing that can stop him recognizing his son. And the younger son remembers the qetsatsah ceremony. That if the villagers see him they will run to that pot, they will lift it up and say you are no longer welcome. And his father runs, the old man runs, runs! Is it affection yes, yes of course, but I tell you what, it is protection. If I can get to my son before the village. He runs to save his son from the villagers, from being cut off. And the father knows that this will cost him his honor. Aristotle, Barbara Brown Taylor quotes and says "Aristotle wrote great men never run in public." But this father runs in public. He is like a woman. He's a mother instead of a father. He runs. He knows it will cost his honor, this will cost his greatness in other people's eyes. He's willing to pay the price. Imagine this God of Psalm 8. This God that we saw last night, this God running, running to greet his son. Listen, the best robe on him and you know the best robe is going to be the father's robe. I'm an old time religion kind of person. When I say I'm saved, what I mean when I talk about the blood of Jesus, what I mean for you to understand is that I'm wearing my father's robe. That's what I mean to tell you when I tell you that I am washed in the blood of the Lamb I'm not telling you about myself being a good person. I'm not talking about that. You ask my husband and my son they would tell you I'm not good all the time. But I want you to know that when I say I am washed in the blood of the Lamb what I mean to say is I am wearing the father's robe. Now, I grew up not so much worrying about the misleading title, but I've always wonder who was the prodigal son. And my friends and I, theologians and I have that battled it out which one of these was the prodigal son. Let's take a vote. How many in the room think the younger son was obviously the prodigal son? Put your hand up. Don't be embarrassed. It's okay. It's okay. How many of you think, of course the older son has to be the prodigal son? How many of you think both sons were the prodigal sons? Anyway what is prodigal? I always thought prodigal meant lost. Because you know we have the lost coin, we have the lost sheep. When a coin is lost I can say always say I have prodigal money when I lost my money. I have prodigal keys. What is prodigal? It turns out that prodigal is not about being lost and found. I'm not talking about the Greek. I'm talking about Webster's Dictionary. Webster dictionary says that prodigal means

extravagant, reckless, profuse, squandering and wasteful. A prodigal person is a spendthrift. A prodigal means abundant, bounty, lavish. Out of the word 'prodigal,' comes to word 'prodigious.' People who are not prodigal are miserly, stingy, mean, tight-fisted. It turns out that prodigal is a good thing! But here is the thing: when prodigal is inward, only being extravagant and reckless and wasteful, only on yourself, that is sinful. Like the younger son who is self-indulgent and selfish and prodigal only thinking of himself at the expense of the family. And prodigal like the older son who is only concerned about his party with the young goat. But there is somebody else here who is prodigal in the story, the father. The father is prodigal and the father is not prodigal towards himself he is prodigal towards his son, so generous so prodigious in mercy and grace. This prodigal father who is prodigious with his welcoming of his younger son, sparing nothing for his celebration. This father who is so prodigal with his older son that he leaves the table and doesn't enjoy the meal so he can go and plead with his older son. He doesn't send a servant. He doesn't send a text message. He goes there himself to meet him face-to-face, eyeball to eyeball. I imagine to even touch him. "Son, everything belongs to you. You see everything belongs to you. If you wanted a young goat for the party, you did not need to ask for permission. You are not a slave. I'm not your Pharaoh. This is home." Prodigal. Prodigal practiced on another. When the father drops everything, runs across the public square, that is prodigal. Prodigal is overwhelming forgiveness. When a rugged battered, lived-with- swine looking daughter is clasped in the loving arms of her mother who can only laugh and cry and say thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus. God is like that. Excessive. Too much overflowing, like a mother who forgets the cultural codes and falls on the neck of her son a soldier who is returning alive from war and all she sees is my son, my boy, my baby. Embracing and kissing him. That is Prodigal. God is like that. Dishing out with helpings of prevenient grace. Dishing out portion of justifying love. Doling out grace and squandering wasteful servings of sanctifying grace. God is like that. God is prodigal in God's grace. Jesus is painting for us a picture of God in the story. Jesus is painting for us a picture of the one. The one who says, a ring. A ring on that finger, on that finger that does not know what a manicure is. Jesus is painting us a picture of God's love. Sandals on those dusty feet. We're going to treat him like a son because he forgot he was a son, and we will treat him as a son until he remembers he is son again. And call the musicians and let them sing, sing, sing! And here is a toast. Raise your glass one and all! A toast; a prodigal toast. Here is to resurrection. He was dead and now he's alive again! My friend Vicki Matson puts it well when she said "when the love begets more love, and generosity gives birth to forgiveness, those kinds of feasts can only come from a God who's amazing open-hearted, extravagant beyond compression." This story is about you. It's not actually about you and me. This story is about God. This story is about one, the One who doesn't judge us from our no deal deals. The One who spreads an extravagant meal and calls us God's children. This parable in the end is about the One. It's not about us, because we don't like each other very much. Because we don't even subscribe to the same tenants of faith. Because we don't have the same languages or culture. We are one because of God. We are not talking about us. All eyes on God. And when that happens and when we see this amazing prodigal one we call father, we call mother, we call parent! This God we can do no other than to sing about amazing grace!