

Everybody knows this gospel story; you all could probably recite the basic outline: younger son wants his freedom; dad lets him go; when things go badly the kid returns home and surprisingly dad welcomes him back; older son feels taken advantage of. It is a story about human emotions and desires that we know so well and let's be honest we have mixed feelings about the whole thing. This was the first parable we looked at in our Monday night discussions for lent and we discovered there was a lot going on we didn't see before.

How we label things changes how we appreciate them. It matters whether we call something: a great value or cheap; freedom fighters or terrorists; aggressive or proactive. So when we call this the **parable the Prodigal Son**, we usually focus on the younger son who wants to leave home, wants to go his own way, and wants independence from the family. Isn't this simply the story of every young person who has wanted to see the world beyond home – like Dorothy looking for somewhere over the rainbow or Luke Skywalker wanting to see the galaxy. This is something most of us have experienced and it is an entirely natural thing. Maybe the kid was a little wild, a little too impatient, maybe he made a bad business deal but part of us has some sympathy for him. After all, he didn't really do anything wrong in asking dad to help him go out on his own. And haven't there been times when we got homesick or decided we had made a mistake and would do anything if we could undo the hurt we caused?

OR Maybe the son is just a manipulative little creep: he weaseled dad out some money, now he back doing it again. Does that seem harsh? Here is a clue for you:

Anytime in the OT when someone rehearses something in their head – like the kid’s speech to his dad - they are up to no good.

But on the other hand, maybe this whole thing is Dad’s fault: he overindulged his favorite child. By law the younger son was only entitled to a 1/3 of Dad’s estate, but Dad gave him half. Did the kid fail because Dad never taught him to be thrifty? Did he spoil him? So is this really the **parable of the reckless Father**?

See—mixed feelings.

Some folk call this the **parable of the Forgiving Father**, and the focus is on the fact that the father was not concerned with money or fairness; he was concerned about his son who was lost. We can then focus on the father’s joy at seeing His Son approaching and seeking forgiveness. Still, in a darker moment, we have to question the actions of the Father, thinking that he caused the heartache in the first place by giving in to the brat. Now, maybe feeling guilty, he was going overboard in welcoming him home. And some part of us wants to say that sensible, real people would never do that. There is part of us that thinks sometimes we have a right to hold a grudge.

That leads us to the other character in this story that some call **the parable of the Elder Brother**. After all in this story which son is really lost? The younger one who leaves and comes back OR the older one who is more and more alienated from his family. There is a lot to be learned from the older brother. Staying at home and being dutiful is one thing,

but to do so with a hard heart is quite another. He needed to speak up. Tell Dad he feels left out and treated like a slave. Did anyone bother to tell him his brother was back or invite him to the celebration? No, he is left working out in the field. So we might think that the elder son had a point. He's been the good one, working to support his father. Why shouldn't he be upset that his brother, who caused his father so much pain, should return and be welcomed so warmly? Isn't there a part of us that, in similar circumstances, wants to say, "Good riddance to bad rubbish?"

In the long run I suspect this would probably best be called **the parable of the dysfunctional family**. We all come from less than ideal families and it's easy to feel sympathy for all the characters in the story. Maybe the **reasons** we feel sympathetic actually reveal some of our own spiritual struggles:

The parts of us that think that the younger son had a right to demand his inheritance and do what he wanted with his money are those parts that don't take seriously our own responsibility for the gifts we have received from the Lord. When we decide it's time to take care of "Number One," we can be consumed by our own selfishness. But if we are truly grounded in the Lord, we will use whatever gifts he has given us so that we can give this love to others.

Those parts of us that think the elder brother was correct are also those parts of us that have not learned to forgive. The elder brother would still inherit the rest of the farm and be fairly wealthy. "Whatever I have is yours," the father told him.

He wasn't told to give another portion of his share of the farm to his brother. He was just asked to welcome the sinner back into the family. But he couldn't because he felt forgiveness had to be earned, painfully paid for; he wanted only justice when the issue was forgiveness.

Finally, and perhaps the real point of this parable, is possibility that if we look around carefully, we might all discover that there are people who have been lost from our lives and we probably share a least some responsibility for that. Maybe they will be thrilled to come back into our life – like the younger son – but often the situation will be tense like the standoff between the father and elder son and healing will be a long process and take a lot of work.

Our sympathies for the characters of this story can be hard to sort out; the situations are too close to home. So what was Jesus point in all this? That all families are dysfunctional.

It might help to know that there was a story told by the rabbis that is older than the time of Jesus and, in the classic version of this story, the younger son sows his wild oats but then repents and is welcomed home with joy. So far the same, but then the older son resents his father's celebration of his brother's return and for his stubbornness or disrespect the older son is rejected by his father. The usual bottom line is that family is more important than money; respecting a Father's wishes is more important than hurt feelings. In Luke's parable, however, there is an unexpected twist in the father's surprise reaction to the elder son's anger.

The twist that Jesus adds to the story is the refusal of the father to reject his elder son who, in Jesus version, is treated by his father with surprising gentleness. We don't know how the standoff between Father and elder son was resolved but it seems that forgiveness here has no limits and nothing else matters more.

The parable of the Prodigal Son, indulgent Father or Elder Brother, whatever, can be an opportunity for us to reflect on the depth of our own commitment to the Lord. The wisdom found in this parable teaches us that human sin can take the form of wild and rebellious behavior or, perhaps more commonly, of sullen, angry and judgmental attitudes. Those of us who lead quiet and "responsible" lives may very well fall into the trap of sullen, resentful and angry attitudes toward others who seem to be "getting away with murder."

It will help our understanding even more to note that this parable is actually part three of trilogy of stories, a three-part narrative about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and **a lost son**. Luke meant for all three stories to function as just one great parable. And so what is common to all three stories? Something precious is lost, resulting in a longing and searching by the owner, and great joy when the lost thing was found. Instead of throwing a tantrum over a loss, throw a party over a return. Applied to God it speaks of scandalous grace, flying in the face of justice, offering mercy that has not been deserved. But that is what God is like. And when this last parable ends, the father is out in the cold, missing the party himself, begging this older son to come in and join in the festivity.

This father loves both of his sons more than they deserve, and he gives to each of them far more mercy than they have earned. Will the older brother heed the father's invitation, will he be reconciled to his brother, will he come inside and join the party? Or for that matter, did the religious folk hearing this parable from Jesus put aside their self-righteous judgment against the sinners who flocked around Jesus, and take a seat at table with them? We do not know. Jesus ends the parable with the decision of the older brother left open. And each of us will finish the parable by our own actions. Whether we join the party or not, the heavenly banquet will go on, every time a lost soul comes trembling and broken back home to God. The only question is whether we will take our place at the festivities too.