

“Going Deeper into the Parable of the Prodigal Son”

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Luke 15 1-3, 11b-32

There was a man who had two sons. We all know this story, right? The younger son insults his father by asking for his inheritance while his dad is still alive, then he goes away to a far country and squanders it. After he's spent everything, there's a famine, and he earns his food by tending pigs, animals that Jews weren't even supposed to touch. When he's thin and hungry, he realizes that working for his dad would be better than eating pig slop, so he trudges home, planning his confession on the way.

We all know how the story ends, too. The father runs out and hugs the boy. He forgives him and throws him a big ole party. And the older brother is jealous. Yeah, yeah. Of course the dad is glad his son is home. We don't really know what the older brother is going to decide to do, but we hope he realizes that the dad loves him too and goes in to the party so that they can all live happily ever after. Great story. Next.

We've heard this story so many times that it's easy not to hear it at all. Yeah, yeah. The father loves his sons. God loves us. We do bad things and God still loves us. Great. Next.

In our world of text messaging and FaceBook status updates, twittering and remote controls, iphones and ipods, google and Wikipedia, we can watch a football game, check on three other tv programs, text with our friends, look up some facts on the internet, and take pictures of our kids or pets all at the same time. We already know what's going to happen in this story. We don't need to any spend time on it. Or for those of us who have less technology in our lives, we've simply heard this story so many times that it's lost its power to surprise us. That sweet old story about the dad who forgives his no good son. Nothing new to learn there.

So when we're faced with a story that we've heard so many times that it's meaning seems obvious or it's lost its meaning altogether, what do we do with it? How do we find anything fresh in such a well-known tale?

One way is to pick a character and reflect more deeply on who that character is and what that character can teach us about our own relationship with God. Let's start with the younger son. My guess is that many of us can identify with him. We may not have insulted our parents by asking for an early inheritance and then running off to Las Vegas to throw it all away on gambling and lavish luxury. But when we look at the larger picture, the younger son's journey may be quite familiar. When the younger son goes away, he leaves his family and community, rejecting those who love and care for him. He goes into the world, taking the gifts he's been given and seeks the world's approval, trying to make it on his own without any help from those he left behind at home.

When we go to the far country, we hear many different voices telling us all the things we need to do with our lives. Those voices may tell us we must go out and prove ourselves, that we need to make ourselves worthy of love, that we need to be more like this person or that person, that we need these *things* in order to be happy, that we must keep striving to do more and be better. As we listen to those voices, we move farther and farther away from our home in God.

Henri Nouwen says, “I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found... I am constantly surprised at how I keep taking the gifts God has given me – my health, my intellectual and emotional gifts – and keep using them to impress people, receive affirmation and praise, and compete for rewards, instead of developing them for the glory of God.”¹ When we’re in that far country, proving our worth, it can be hard to return home to the love of God. We may not feel worthy. We may feel too sinful. We may feel that God requires explanations from us or even bargaining – if I could just be a hired hand in your house, then that would be okay. But when the prodigal son returns, the father doesn’t even wait for him to make his confession. We are the beloved children of God. When we return home, God rejoices that we are no longer lost; now we are found.

Unfortunately, not everyone rejoices at the return of the younger son. The next character we need to look at is the older son, the son who becomes lost without ever leaving home. It’s easy to gloss over the older son in this story, writing him off as the jealous guy who simply doesn’t understand that his father loves both sons. I totally identify with him, though.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 43.

How dare the father reward the younger son with a party for the whole neighborhood when what he should have done was kick him out and make him pay for what he did? The older son worked hard, being obedient, being responsible, respecting his father and his community, contributing to the family. He followed the rules, proved his worth, and did not waste his time on fun. And never did his father throw a party for him. And then when the little jerk who stole a chunk of the family property returns with nothing to show for it, he gets rewarded with a feast. How can that possibly be fair?

The elder son is like the people Michael described in his sermon last week – those who feel superior to others and judge them. The elder son is as lost as the younger son is, but instead of being lost in a distant land, the elder son is lost in resentment and envy and judgment. He can't comprehend that his father could forgive his foolish younger brother, and he feels that his dutiful obedience is worth nothing in his father's eyes. He has lost his joy and feels that he has been punished while his brother has been rewarded when it should have been the other way around.

Elder brothers can frequently be found in the church as the most dutiful and faithful people who no longer find joy in their service and who are quick to point out the flaws of others. I haven't encountered people acting like elder brothers here, but if you find yourself feeling resentful of others who you deem irresponsible or lost or who you think are not properly following the rules, then you might want to spend some time reflecting on the elder son. The whole reason Jesus tells this parable was in response to the Pharisees grumbling that Jesus was welcoming sinners and eating with them. The Pharisees were the equivalent of the good people of the church who followed the rules and were faithful to God.

Like the older brother they couldn't understand how the sinners could be forgiven while their faithfulness was seemingly unrewarded. But God loved them too and forgave them too. In the story we don't hear whether the elder son will accept his father's love and forgiveness and embrace his younger brother. We are left to wonder what his response will be. For those of us who are the elder brothers, what is our response? Will we come home? Can we hear the father when he tells us, "My child, you are always with me, and all I have is yours"?

The final character of the parable is the father. We quickly associate the father with God, who embraces all lost children with abundant love. This father has no thought of his own status or worth. When his son asks for his share of the inheritance, instead of teaching him his place, the father agrees. This would not have happened in Jesus' time. He would have been known as the foolish father. Then, when his squanderer son returns home with nothing but rags on his back, rather than allow the community to greet him and kick him out, the father runs to his son to embrace him. Again, this would not have happened in Jesus' time. Fathers didn't run to greet children. Then, during the party for the community, given so that everyone would understand that the younger son was back in his father's good graces, the father leaves his guests to go out to his older son who is sulking. One more thing that would never have happened. This father is acting in scandalous ways. This father forgives both of his lost children, extending his love to them no matter what anyone thinks, no matter how much they've wronged him.

We are created in the image of God. Though we may sometimes be lost children, we are called to become like the father. We are called to show the forgiveness and generosity of the father to the other lost children of our world. We are called to embrace others with the abundant love that God has shown us.

We are called to forget rigid rules and regulations, our status, the ways in which others have slighted or offended us, to let go of the grudges and resentments we may be carrying, and instead to reach out welcoming arms, just as God has done for us. Jesus showed us how. We really are the beloved children of God. When we believe that, really believe that God loves us no matter what, then we will extend God's love to everyone around us. It just doesn't get any better than that.