

A Certain Man Had Two Sons

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Today's parable has as its best title the first line: "A certain man had two sons. Two. Not one. Both lost in their own ways. There are many ways to be lost, and by the grace of God, many ways to be found. I once titled a sermon on this text; "the Prodigal Father and His Two Lost Sons." Yes, it is a story of a father whose love for both of his sons could be called "prodigal", so lavish and so recklessly extravagant, which is what the word "prodigal" means: "wasteful, extravagant, profuse." This is how the father loves both sons.

I

"A certain man had two sons." Amy Jill-Levine, the Jewish professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, says that when a Jewish audience in the first-century heard this first line, they would have thought: "Uh, oh, trouble's coming." Think of Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau. So there is dramatic tension from the beginning.

Here comes the younger son. He goes to his father and asks for his share of the inheritance. Now! It is an insolent and shocking request. Inheritance was to be passed along at death. The son was saying in effect to his father: “I wish you were dead. You are dead to me”.

The father granted his request—which made him an old fool in everybody’s eyes. The younger son, by laws of inheritance, was to be given one third of his father’s estate, the older son two thirds. The father’s estate was mostly in land, so one third of his land was sold off and converted into cash, which he handed to his son.

Think of it. One third of the family farm gone forever. You can imagine the resentment of the older son. He saw the hurt in his father’s eyes. And if his brother ever came back and his doting father received him back, he was not going to live off *his* two thirds.

No doubt tongues were wagging in town. Land passed down over generations gone. The old man was a fool and his younger son a reprobate. It was a threat to the social fabric.

The son took his fortune and headed to the “far country.” Gentile territory. It was like leaving your small town with its restrictions and prying eyes and heading to New York City. Big Apple, here I come.

You can imagine all the trouble he got himself into. He suddenly had a hundred “friends” and a thousand temptations. An easy mark. Soon he was broke, his fortune squandered, as the text says, in “loose living”, no details given.

In desperation he hired himself out to a farmer who soon had him feeding pigs, to the Jew a picture of utter degradation. The son became so destitute he began to eat the pods he fed to the pigs.

Then came the miracle of turning. He, as the text says, “came to himself.” We have each of us, a true self and surrounding it layers of false self. The spiritual journey is to excavate down through all the layers of false self formed by the world and our experiences in the world and come to our true self created in the image of God. The young man recovered his true self. To come home to your true self is to come home to God.

Did the remembrance of his father’s kindness help him come to this point? The great black writer James Baldwin wrote:

Love takes off the masks
that we fear we cannot live without
and know we cannot live within.

The son took off his masks, reconnected to his true self and headed home.

I remember a night at the Agape Meal in my Ft. Worth church. Every Thursday we put on a family style meal for the homeless community. About 200 came every Thursday, and we ate together around tables. One night a nineteen year old girl came in, in all the kinds of trouble you can find on the streets. She took in the friendship and love in the room. The next week one of her friends told me that after the meal the girl had called her parents and said, “Mom, Dad, I’m coming home.” Her friend said it was the *kindness* she experienced that night that moved her to call home.

The true nature of the son’s repentance is revealed in his words. He will not go home and presume upon his father’s mercy, as if nothing had happened, as if a third of the farm were not gone. This is the speech he rehearsed in his mind to say: “Father I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired hands.”

III

The homecoming scene is one of pure joy. When the father sees him coming up the road he is filled with *compassion*. There's that word again. Like the compassion of the Good Samaritan, the God-like compassion Jesus was talking about when he said, "Be compassionate as your Father [in heaven] is compassionate." Then the father began running, running to meet his son. It was considered bad form for a man in that time and culture to run. Aristotle said, "Great men do not run in public." But there he was running down the road, robes flapping to meet his son. And before the son could even finish his carefully rehearsed speech of repentance, the father threw his arms around him and kissed and kissed him, like the woman earlier in Luke who had anointed Jesus' feet and kissed and kissed them. Unrestrained love.

A scholar named Kenneth Bailey went to live and teach for 17 years among Middle-eastern peasants who live today much as their forbearers 2,000 years ago. He told them Jesus' parables and listened closely to how *they* listened and responded to the stories. It helped him understand better how the parables were originally heard.

Here is his reconstruction of the homecoming scene. A wealthy Middle-eastern farmer did not live way out of town on a big ranch, but rather on the edge of town. This is not a scene of two individuals running up a long road to meet each other, two solitary individuals. It is a village scene.

The father's house is on the edge of the village and the end of "Main Street." The son must go right through the village to come home, a village which had written him off and condemned him. The son's behavior had been an offense not just to the family but also to the village.

So, imagine it. As the boy approaches the village, people begin to gather along the street forming a gauntlet of cold stares and jeers. His father is fully aware of what the village thinks: his son a no-count, no-good, and he a fool.

So do you see it? The father sees his son beginning to make his way through the village. He runs to meet him, wraps his arms around him, kisses him over and over and takes him home in his arms.

The father is setting the tone for the village, as well as the family. *He has run the gauntlet for his son*, taken on the jeers and insults.

The story is told of Jackie Robinson the first black player to play in the major leagues. He faced hatred and abuse everywhere he went. Early in the season he was at his position near second base. The crowd began to jeer. The jeers grew louder and filled the stadium. The Dodgers' short-stop, Pee Wee Reese, walked over from his position and stood beside him, just stood beside him, until the jeers subsided. That is what the father did for his son. And that is

what God has done for us in Jesus. And that is what God calls us to do for those in our community who are shunned, shamed, despised, and dismissed.

The father then called for a party. “Hurry, bring a tux for my son, and the family ring, and shoes for his feet! (All marks of sonship.) Kill the fatted calf. For my son was dead and is alive, was lost and now is found!”

IV

Of course, the story is not over. This is a story of two lost sons. The elder son is out in the field and hears the sounds of the party. When he learns what is going on he has a fit of jealousy and righteous indignation. He refuses to go in to the party—which is itself an insult and embarrassment to his father.

But look! The father *goes out to him*, just as he did for the younger son. His love is for both sons.

When they meet the elder son spits out his speech to his father: “Listen, all these years I’ve slaved for you, and I’ve never disobeyed your command, and yet, and yet you’ve never given me a young goat so I might celebrate with my friends. But when *this son of yours* (not “my brother”) came back, who has eaten up your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him.”

Note, the story had not specified *how* the younger son squandered his money, but the elder son is all too ready to fill in the details: with “prostitutes”. How we love to fill in the details of other’s sins—often with the details of our own secretly imagined ones.

Listen now to the tenderness of the father’s response. “*My dear child*, you are always with one, and all that I have is yours. All of it. But we *have* to celebrate, for this *brother of yours* [note again the language] was dead and is alive, was lost and has been found.”

V

I think there is some of both sons in us. The younger son whose behavior has wounded self, God and others. And the elder son who is lost in his righteousness, living in the father’s house but far away from the father’s love. Paul spoke of our being “dead in our trespasses.” (Eph.2:1) We can be dead in our righteousness too.

There is the good daughter, good son in us, the responsible ones, the dutiful ones. We’ve worked hard to please—God, family, everybody else. And yet we can be as lost as the younger son, lost in jealousy, bitterness, resentment and an all too sure sense of being right.

How long has it been since some of you have sung “Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling”? The last words “Calling, O sinner, come home.” But we elder, responsible, good sons and daughters need to find our way home too. “Ye who are *righteous* come home, come home.”

No more dancing as fast as we can, juggling as many balls in the air as possible. No more perfectionism that breeds anger and judgment. *You are loved, too!* “Ye who are weary come home.”

All those merit badges we’ve earned—they can become a shield to the very love we most want: the lavish, unrestrained, limitless love of God. Let them drop.

There are many sad things in this world: to live your life in repetitive self-harm, and harm to others, running, running from God, from self and from everyone who might know you and love you, living in hiding, never coming home.

But perhaps this is the saddest: to try to buy what can only be given, to try to earn what is yours already, to search the world over for the treasure in your own back yard, and to live forever trying to earn God’s love and never discovering that it’s a *gift* as free as the sun that shines and the rain that falls from the sky.