

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32/March 27, 2022

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning we have one of the most beloved parables. One that is well known by just about everyone – Christian or not. The Prodigal Son, or is it the Prodigal Father? Prodigal means - spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant.

So, who is actually the prodigal one? The younger son or the father? And then there is the older brother out in the field. Could he be prodigal too?

I find this parable to be fascinating. I love to hear what people have to say about it. I've been in some pretty tense Bible studies with pastors who have very passionate opinions about this parable and are sure that their understanding is the correct one.

This morning, I'm not going to tell you the "correct" answer, because this parable actually serves as a mirror. It reflects back to us our very own images. It's like abstract expressionism. What we say about the painting actually says more about us than it does the painting or the artist who painted it. And in that respect, this parable is really helpful.

So, let's take a look at all of the different ways this parable can be looked at.

We'll start off with the main characters. The father and two sons.

The father is prodigal in that he gives all that he has to his sons. That's pretty extravagant. And then he makes a fool of himself when he runs to meet the son who has returned, and then goes out to talk with the other son in the field who refuses to come in. He's not only prodigal with his money and land, but also his status and reputation.

Often this parable is interpreted as God being the prodigal father. God gives us everything. Jesus dies on the cross to give us our inheritance. Most people find comfort in the father, even as he goes out to bring his older son back into the house with the reunited family.

However, there are those who get upset with the father and say that the whole story is ridiculous. He should never have been so generous with the younger son. The younger son should have had to do more reparations before being allowed back into the family.

I think how we are brought up has a lot to do with how we view this story. Strict parents – maybe we see it as unfair. Trouble makers – we probably rejoice.

One person I know totally identifies with the father, because his son has been estranged from him for years. He knows the pain of the father. He has been waiting and hoping his son will return so that he can hold him once again. He doesn't care about the past, he only wants his son back.

Now let's look at that younger son. My professor has a theory that all younger siblings cut him a lot of slack.

So – it was pretty audacious that the younger son asked his dad for his inheritance. But, did he really say to his dad – you are dead to me – give me my money. Seems a bit extreme. Maybe he just had wanderlust and wanted to see what else is out there. Maybe farming wasn't his calling. Again – whatever we think is more a reflection on us than the son. We are reading things into it, and that is totally ok.

One interesting thing to do with the younger brother is examine why he failed in the foreign land. Studies have been done with this parable to see how people in other countries react to it. Some say he failed because there was a famine. Others say he failed because no one would help him. Most Americans say he failed, because he wasted his money. But, if there hadn't been a famine, would he have failed?

We did this at a clergy conference and I said, because I'd been gone away from home for so long, that he failed because he had no family to support him. Again – that was a reflection on me.

And then there is the fact that he came to himself. For those who have been in a self-inflicted difficulty, this idea of coming to himself really hits home. The idea of – this is not who I am – or I don't have to be here doing this – has probably happened to a lot of us. I know it has happened to a lot of people during COVID where they have reevaluated their circumstances and decided to make a change.

Some people, however, still have total disdain for the younger brother. Why did he come to himself? Because he was starving. They put him as being totally selfish instead of being humiliated. Again – depending on our own life experience, we can see it either way. But, going back to the father, he doesn't care about the reason at all. The father just wants his son back.

Unfortunately though, when he gets one son back, the other leaves. The third character in the story is the older brother in the field who refuses to rejoice with those who are rejoicing. He likely didn't mourn with his father when he mourned the loss of the younger son either. Perhaps he said – good riddance!

The Bible is filled with sibling rivalry, and our relationship with our siblings perhaps has bearing on our interpretation of the parable as well. If your older sibling was overbearing, you might side with the younger brother needing to get out of there.

But, in my experience, most people actually take the side of the older brother. It's not fair. The younger son doesn't deserve his father's grace or mercy. The older brother has been working as a slave for his father and he is the deserving one. The younger brother should have "pulled himself up by his own bootstraps." That's often the American view of things, which is total hogwash and completely lacking compassion. No one is a self-made man, but it is a myth we like to tell. Whoops – now that's a reflection on me, right?

But, the thing is, the father has actually already given the older brother his inheritance, which was twice as big as the younger brother's. The older brother actually owns everything, but he sees himself as a slave. Interesting, right?

How often do we think we have nothing when we actually have everything? The older son has everything and is living with the father and working with him every day. But he doesn't see it and he just can't line himself up with the father's joy of the family being reunited. That's prodigal as well – he is totally wasting his resources – including his relationships.

Personally, if there was a party at my parents' house, I wouldn't even think twice about joining it. I don't have to be invited into my parents' house. Their house is my house too. I even have the key to let myself in. And if there is cake involved, I'm there.

But, it seems to me that too often we are so obsessed with money and things that we take our relationships for granted. We find security in possessions instead of the people in our lives. Both sons have made the mistake of putting wealth over the love of their father. I don't know about you, but I've see it happen quite often myself, especially after a funeral.

Perhaps this is another reason why Jesus is resurrected. It's not about the stuff. It's about relationship. Luke 16:13 reminds us that we cannot serve both God and wealth.

In this text from Luke, the Pharisees and scribes are clearly the older brother who refuses to rejoice with the sinners and tax collectors who have been welcomed back into the family of God.

I really wish this text was aligned with Romans 12:15 – rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. The father is clearly the only one doing that, and that ties in with the theme here today, which is reconciliation. All of the lessons revolve around that same idea. So, as we consider where we are in this story we have to ask ourselves - With whom do I need to be reconciled?

As we ponder this parable and identify where our strong feeling about it are, we see ourselves reflected back and we can then figure out with whom we need to restore a relationship. Is it with a parent? Is it with a sibling? Is it with some sort of societal issue? Or, is it with God?

During Lent, we remember that God is God and we are not. We are not the judge, jury, or executioner. We are the defendant. The ones who need a Savior.

We cannot save ourselves. We all fall short of the glory of God. So, God comes in Christ as our Savior and forgives us our sin, our broken relationship with God. Reconciled to God, we go out into the world to be reconciled and to reconcile with others, so that the family of God can be restored.

It's not about the stuff. It's about relationships.

God brings us back to ourselves, so that we can bring others back as well.

When his children are restored to him and their siblings, the father's prayer is answered. Our prayer is that we too get to be a part of the homecoming party. And so, there are those other characters in the parable that rarely even get a nod – the servants. Those who prepare for the party, cook the food, and make sure everyone is comfortable. If we find ourselves in no other place in this parable, it hopefully will be there. So, how might we serve as the servants of the master in the work of reconciliation?

Absolutely no one is excluded from the party.

Thanks be to God. Amen.