

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Is there is a more beloved story in the Bible than that of the Prodigal Son?

Ralph Waldo Emerson called it the greatest story in the Bible...or out of it. Charles Dickens agreed. Along with the Good Samaritan, it is surely the most famous parable of Jesus. The question, of course, becomes how does one preach such a famous and beloved tale?

The answer, I think, is to remember that it is, first and foremost, a *story*. You see, more often than not, we read the parables of Jesus as if they were Aesop's fables, something from which we should derive a clear moral. But the parables of Jesus are *stories*. Unlike fables, they are full with characters with whom we can identify.

Each of us has felt like the younger son: eager to get away, abashed by our mistakes, willing to do almost anything to get back to our old lives. And each of us has felt like the older brother as well: hardworking, diligent, and then resentful at the undeserved gain or unpunished wastefulness of another. And each of us has felt like the father in this story as well: desperate for a sign of a long-missed loved one, overjoyed by his or her unexpected return.

During this week, I invite you to identify with one of these characters. Pick your favorite, or at least pick the one who you most identify with at the time. Think about the story from the point of view of that character. If it helps, feel free to change the gender of the characters: a mother, two daughters, or a daughter and a son, etc.

I know this is different than most sermons, but that is the point. Parables were not shared so they could be explained. Instead, they need to be experienced so that they might, in time, be lived. Because the thing is, we *do* live this parable with all of its relational twists and turns regularly, and the more we see our lives and story in this story, they more likely we are to hear God's earnest plea to them to come home...or into the party....and enjoy God's great delight.

It might help to focus on just one major detail and go deep, entering the whole of the story through this one detail. Here are three possibilities briefly to illustrate what I mean.

First, one of the things that strikes me in this story is the absolute foolishness of this father in response to his son's remarkably offensive request. It is offensive because asking for an inheritance ahead of time is like wishing aloud that your parents were dead. It would be like looking your folks in the eye and essentially saying, "If you are not going to hurry up and kick the bucket, how about coughing up my share right now?"

And yet, this father goes ahead and gives it to him. Seeing as how that wealth is tied up in land, this is not about going to the bank and cashing in some certificates of deposit. But rather, the father actually sells off tracts of real estate, herds, and more.

And then, when his son has wasted all this away, the father *runs*....something no self-respecting landowner would do....runs to meet his son, cuts off his kid's lame apology, and restores him to his place in the family.

Trust me, every single one of you knows that this kind of thing *never* happens, at least not in this world. Which is precisely the point. Jesus is introducing people to the relational logic of the kingdom of God that runs contrary to and way beyond the legal logic of the world. I will get to more of that in a few minutes.

The second detail that comes to mind is wondering whether or not the younger son is really repentant. The lectionary in Lent would seem to have us read it that way. At verse 17, he “comes to his senses”, which could mean that he realizes he has been a complete jerk, or that he figured out that his father's servants are even better off than he is. So, is he sincere, or just sneaky to get back into the old man's good graces? Like some folks are really repentant, while others come just out of desperation with their last breath? Who knows? Better yet, who cares? That is the real question, because the story seems to reveal that God is just so happy, so overjoyed by their return, regardless of the motivation. Let's face it. That concept is very hard for we humans to stomach. Which is why God is God, and we are not.

Finally, the older son. He is right, isn't he? In almost every possible way, he is right...about his brother, about himself, about his ridiculously permissive and forgiving father. But, sometimes we have to choose between being right, and being in relationship. This older son. What happens to him? Do you notice that the parable ends with that mystery. The story has no ending for the older son because he has a choice to make. He also can end up in a “distant country” like his younger brother, but this would be one of his own making as he loses any connection to his brother, his father, or the others celebrating in the new life his brother has been given.

Who is the loser here, and in what way? Tell me you have not heard of something similar. Someone who will say that he or she has not talked with “X” in years, but does not now even remember how it all started. Our brokenness with each other has a life of its own, and often we do not know why. All we know, or all we remember, is that we took sides because it seemed to matter at the time.

But what Jesus reveals in this story is really a glimpse into the country of God. Sure, it reads “kingdom of God”. But let us think of it, through this parable, this story, as a visit into another country. Another land. One that feels, smells, tastes different...and why?

Because in this different country, nobody counts things here. Know what I mean? No tracking billable hours, no counting the days until school lets out. No marking debits on the balance sheet. No cries from the backseat of “Are we there yet?” Better yet, no counting old grievances and grudges. No dredging up past wrongs or unsettled scores. For whatever reason, people in this country have lost track of all that, and cannot remember why anyone would keep count in the first place.

Of course, our world. The (quote) real world (unquote) does not work that way. We NEED to keep count, otherwise we lose track of what we owe each other, and cannot know the value of anything. If we do not weigh it, measure it, assess and evaluate it.....JUDGE it, and everything, and everyone around us, how would we....how could we...figure how we are richer, better, smarter, etc. than the other guy or girl?

But here, in this different country....the country of God...there is value in everything and everyone. It all, we all, matter, in and of itself. It just does.

In this fallen world of ours, we do need to track and count and measure and remember, because that is the way most things work. But...that does not work for relationships. If we start counting the right and the wrong, the good and the bad, we never get over it. The older son's problem here, really. Before long, we get so unhappy we will actually convince ourselves that if we could just count more, know more...maybe get another bite from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...then we will finally be happy.

So, Jesus paints a picture of this world in his story of the foolish son, and the seemingly even more foolish father. A world of unmerited grace. And counters do not, cannot understand...being pulled down by the weight of their own claims as they mutter about their complaints, such as "All these years, you never (fill in the blank)".

But to those of us who have, in one way or another, been down and out...to those who have been lost...to those who have been dead of spirit and have been resurrected, reborn...it may not be the (quote) real world (unquote), but it is the one that really matters. The mercy we hear of, the grace that we are pointed to, the help that allows us to endure all the counting and measuring around us, all through the loving and merciful God who eagerly waits for us to return, running to meet us, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.