

Lord, make these words Your Word, that our hearts may become Your heart. Amen.

Jesus did not give his parables titles... bible editors did that, and by doing so, they skewed interpretation. This parable is usually called “The Prodigal Son.” I would call it “The Prodigal Father.” The Father is the “Prodigal” one here, the wasteful one. Wasting his money, wasting his love. His actions, which make no sense from a human point of view, are all about extravagance. In all three parables Jesus tells in this chapter, about the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son, he talks about extravagant love that does not rest until what is lost has been found.

In this story, love and mercy are represented by wealth, and there is no end to it. This father spends his wealth lavishly on his sons, and seems willing to absorb endless pain from them. In fact, each of these sons offends – in very different ways. Just as wealth stands for love, so each son represents a different kind of sin.

There are two kinds of sin – the kind that goes up and out... that is visible, obvious. That’s easy to judge, right? We can see it, see the damage. The other kind of sin goes inward and deep... harder to see, easier to rationalize. This is the sin of judging, criticizing, condemning others. It is far more insidious and harmful. When we presume to judge God’s creation, judging what and who God has made – that is sin, said Jesus. It is also human nature.

I used to lead a monthly healing service in downtown Stamford, Connecticut, geared toward men and women staying in the homeless shelters there. And there was this group of people who hung out on the sidewalk outside on Sundays, drinking and swearing and carrying on. We always invited them to come in, and they always said no. Finally, one Father’s Day, three men joined us. I told this story, of the Prodigal Father – and one guy objected. He did not think it was right that the father forgave this younger son. Now, I don’t know what all this gentleman had done or been through, but he spent his Sundays drinking on the street, so I can imagine he at least knew some people like the younger son. Maybe he’d been like that. But he had no compassion.

Now remember what prompted the telling of these three stories of lost things – It’s the Pharisees, who excelled in keeping the law, complaining about how Jesus eats with sinners. They don’t like the idea of showing kindness to people who do bad things – and neither do we, much, do we. So he tells a story about a man with two sons. The younger son says to the father, “I’m tired of waiting around till you die; give me the half of the estate that will belong to me.” And the father does it. He divides his estate in half – he buys out his son’s share – and a few days later the son takes his portion of the money and leaves. He severs the relationship.

He goes to a faraway land and squanders his whole inheritance – his prematurely gained inheritance – in riotous living. And right about when he runs out of money, a famine hits the country he's in. He gets a job feeding pigs. He's starving. Now, we, the audience, know all about the uncleanness of pigs – so he is not only doing subservient work, he is making himself ritually unclean. Completely beyond the reach of righteous people, just like a tax collector collaborating with the Romans or a prostitute working for her next meal – or a businesswoman swindling a client, or an addict stealing for a fix.

In this pigsty the man has a moment of clarity. Jesus uses such economy of phrase “When he came to himself.” When we're wandering in sin, it's like we split off from our true self. In repentance, we re-integrate, and see ourselves clearly. He remembers the food at his father's table, which was always plentiful. He knows he has sold his birthright as “son.” But maybe he can be a servant in his father's house. He could at least be fed and be where he grew up.

He imagines approaching home, and prepares his speech in advance. He practices his speech all the way home. But even before he gets there, his father sees him coming and runs to meet him. The son might wonder – is he coming to greet me, or to run me off? The father reaches his son he throws his arms around him and kisses him. The son falls to his knees and tries to make his carefully rehearsed speech, but the father doesn't even answer. He just calls for a robe – the best one – and sandals and a ring. All signs of status and authority.

He calls for a feast, *“Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”*

The music swells and the servants carry out the platters loaded with food, and the dancing girls come out, as the curtain falls to thunderous applause. What a happy ending! All is forgiven. Love has triumphed. What a great story!

But what's this? The curtain's not dropping. The play isn't over in three acts. Now the scene moves outside, where an angry man is interrogating a servant. “What's going on in there? He what? The fatted calf? That we've been saving?” The servant tells him, *“Your brother has come home!”* “This is an outrage. I'm not going in there,” he says. “Not as long as he's in there.”

So his father comes out to him – notice that it's not once, but twice, that this father goes out to meet his sons. He pleads with his son to come in. But his elder son is furious and all his grievances come bursting out – The father tries to protest, “Look, you've had the run of the place. We've shared everything. Whatever is mine is yours. It's all been yours. I t all is yours.” *But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’* ” It's not things that need to be claimed, but relationships – this is your brother, not just my son. And he's been found – reclaim him!”

And there we're left. The Master Storyteller doesn't add one more word.
Does the older brother stay outside, never again coming to the family table?
Does he leave, because he can't live by these rules? How does this story end?
Or did Jesus know his listeners needed to find the ending for themselves?
How many people do you know who have cut themselves off from church,
from God, because they didn't think they could be forgiven?
Or because they couldn't forgive? Imagine yourself a Pharisee listening – a fine, upstanding,
citizen who's lived by the rules your whole life –and this ... "rabbi" comes along and says
guess what, the folks who've been partying up a storm day and night, who can't pull
themselves together to hold a job for long – or worse, those who hurt others, murderers,
dictators – if they come return to my love, they're welcome at my table too.

Who wants to hear about forgiveness and mercy if this is the result!
That "those people" can be forgiven and welcomed in?
I suspect most of us are more like the elder son, doing the right thing,
working hard at what needs to be done. Isn't that what we're supposed to do?
Well yes, if we're going to keep looking at the world in human terms.
But that's not our invitation. Paul writes to the Corinthians,
"From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view."
In human terms, nothing this father does makes sense. The Father is the
"Prodigal" one here, the wasteful one. Wasting his money, wasting his love.
So is God – wasting his love, wasting his son's life, for us.

The world of the two sons is one of scarcity, of take what you can get,
of earn your keep. Neither believes he will be given enough.
But the father's world is one of unlimited wealth. Unlimited love.
The father gives up half his estate to his son, who squanders it away –
but guess what? There's still plenty left on which to feast and celebrate.
The older son could have been having a party a week. No end of fatted calves.

God deals in abundance, not scarcity. Abundance is a hallmark of the realm of God.
It's one of the big ways God shows up and says, "Over here... here I am!"
So three weeks ago, we put out a call for prom dresses for high schoolers who can't afford to
buy them, hoping we'd have enough for the demand.
And by the time this weekend rolled around, we had over 200.
The pews of this church were draped in dresses being sorted.
Some 15 young ladies arrived here yesterday, were greeted with sparkling cider in
champagne glasses and elegant finger foods, and an array of gorgeous gowns in every color,
size, shape and style. And the shoes! And the purses! And the jewelry!
We had style consultants to help them and dressing rooms.
Each one left here feeling beautiful, with a gift bag and a white rose and our love.
They didn't have to pay for it, or do anything to deserve it. They just got it.
Where abundance shows up, need emerges. We hope it's the beginning of relationship with
some youth in need of mentors and a support network like us.

It shows us what it means to be agents of God's reconciliation – to pass along the love and forgiveness and generosity we have received so others can feel it.
So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us...

We are to go to those who feel they have lost their status as children of God, and gently lead them back to the table, proclaiming God's forgiveness and delight in them.
And we are to go out to the bitter and resentful judging ones, reminding them that their place is inside at the table too.

Who do you know that needs to hear that you love them, despite what they've done?
Who do you know that needs to hear that God loves them despite who they think they are?
Who do you know, who needs to hear that God's loving the unworthy doesn't diminish God's love for them – that God's love will never run out.
Who needs to be invited to the feast for the first time?
Who needs to be invited back?
Where does this story leave you?

Amen.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So Jesus told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.