

March 6, 2016

Joshua 5:9-12

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

I love the parable of the Prodigal Son so much. I love it because there are so many different ways to read it and to tell. We call the parable of the Prodigal Son. Just as easily we could call it the parable of the Ungracious Brother. Perhaps best yet, we could call it the parable of The Wise Father.

Let's hear the story again, but instead closely re-written from the point of view of the Wise Father:

"As you know, I have two sons. My younger one was always a little more of a loose cannon. I didn't always know what to do with him. So when he asked me for his share of the inheritance, I wasn't sure I was making the best decision in giving it to him. I doubted my decision. But I figured, you know, maybe he would learn something. Then I worried that maybe I was being a pushover. It's hard to be a parent. It's hard to know the best way to raise your kids. In the end, you pray.

"Well, because my son was always a bit of screwball, I wasn't surprised when I got wind of the partying. I won't go into details, but it was a lot more than the "sowing your wild oats" kind of stuff. He spent all his money. He wouldn't work. He managed to keep a couple of women interested in him—God knows how, but sometimes you never know what a woman will see in a man. Don't you find that to be the case so often? Women are willing to put up with so much. I'm sure there was drinking, probably more than that, too. I just didn't know.

"He finally got a janitorial job, mopping floors, cleaning toilets, all that stuff, at the local Greyhound station. By now he was bottoming out and he knew it.

"The way he tells it, he woke up one morning so full of hate for himself that he didn't know what to do. He didn't know where to go? In a way, there *was* nowhere to go except home. Wasn't it Mark Twain who said "home is where they have to take you in"? So home—back to us—is where he went.

"He showed up without a warning, standing at the door like a beggar, looking worse than the south side of a northbound mule. Almost unrecognizable.

"But *I* knew him. He was my son. My boy. Along with his older brother, he was one of the two lights of my life. He was my joy. And he was ashamed and crying and pitiful and maybe anybody else in their right minds would have sent hi packing. But I couldn't. I wouldn't have. He was my son. All I could see was that I loved him. I was just grateful—to him, to God, to anybody—that he was alive.

"So I took him, took him back. I set him up with the L.L. Bean catalog, my credit card and the phone. I had a party for him. I called all the relatives, even the ones who never shut up about what a fool I'd been to give him the money in the first place. And you know, people like that can't resist a party.

“We threw a good party. We ate, we danced. And this time it was my other son—my older, normally reserved son--who drank too much. I’d never known him to do anything like that. He was a solid boy. A man, now really. Newly married. I relied on him in the business. I asked his advice more and more. I trusted him. He was even-tempered, fair, moderate in everything. Except for this one night. He drank. And the more he drank, the madder he got. At me. At me, not his brother.

“Listen,’ my elder son said to me, ‘for all these years I have been working like a slave for you and never gone against anything you’ve said. But even when I got married you never gave a party like this one. But then this son of yours comes back after drinking and screwing his way through half of all that’s yours and you kill the fatted calf.’”

“I’d never heard such bitterness from him. I’d never known him to be bitter at all. Before I knew what I was doing I took him in my arms—this big, tall, strong kid. My boy. One of the two lights of my life. I couldn’t stand to see him be hurt by love, when I knew that love and only love was what would heal. I said to him:

“Son, you are always with me. What is mine is always 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.”

Jesus’ parable, unlike a lot of stories, has a hero. The Wise Father is the one who shows both sons that life is unfair. More importantly he is the one who says that love is unfair. It’s not a matter of justice.

Now I want to tell you about a different version of the story. It was written by the French Catholic writer, Andre Gide who called it, “The Return of the Prodigal Son.” And in it, Gide turns the story nearly upside down, in order to demonstrate that nothing, not life’s unfairness nor the unfairness of love can separate him from his Father’s love. That love is no respecter of borders.

Now, when Gide published this story, his fellow Catholic writers condemned it. After all, the story introduces a third brother, a younger brother who was *inspired* by the flight of the Prodigal son. And indeed, Gide makes the reader see that the Prodigal son had begun with noble aspirations that were frustrated, that led him into his dissolution and then destitution.

The story begins with the son’s return. The day after the party, after the joyful reunion, the Prodigal, in four separate scenes, speaks first to his father, then to his elder brother--who mostly just wants to scold him--then to his mother, then, at last, to his younger brother.

After speaking with his Father, the Prodigal goes to see his elder brother. Their conversation begins with the Elder Brother angrily blaming the Prodigal for being a chaos-making, at odds with the rest of the family, and especially with him. “I live by order,” the Elder Brother tells the Prodigal, “Anything other than that is the fruit and seed of pride.”

Meanwhile, the Elder Brother had instructed the father to reprimand the Prodigal, but he soon realizes the Father has not done that. It is left up to him to do.

“I know what our Father said to you,” he says. “It was vague. He no longer expresses himself very clearly, so that he can be made to say what one wants. But I understand his thought very well... You understood incorrectly. There are not several ways of understanding the Father. There are not several ways of listening to him. There are not several ways of loving him...”

The Prodigal bears the chastisement of the Elder Brother, and submits, as if he were a slave submitting to a master.

Then the Prodigal goes in to talk to his mother. And his mother, so happy at his return, tells him that she had never, ever stopped waiting, hoping and praying for his return. She caresses him as she had when he was a child. And he assures her he will not leave again. He assures her that he will try to become like his older brother, look after their property, choose a wife, have a family.

Secure in this knowledge, the mother confesses that she worries about the youngest of the three brothers. She fears—rightly—that the younger brother wants to follow in the Prodigal’s footsteps. She wants to Prodigal prevent that. She does not want another son to suffer as the Prodigal has suffered—poverty, indignity, bodily harm and privation.

“Speak to him,” she tells him. “He will listen to you, the Prodigal. Tell him what disappointment you met on your way. Spare him... I know he will listen to a great deal from you.”

And so the Prodigal goes in to see his younger brother. And just as their mother had said, he admits he wants to leave. “I am the boy you were when you left!” he cries, “Tell me, did you find nothing but disappointment on your wanderings? Is all that I imagine outside and different from here only an illusion?”

Nothing the Prodigal says can convince him to stay. He is just like the Prodigal, thirsting, hungering, longing for a different kind of life.

This the Prodigal understands most profoundly—and really, there is nothing he can do to stop him. “Come! Kiss me, my younger brother,” he says, “you are taking with you all my hopes. Be strong. Forget us. Forget me. May you never come back.... Go down quietly. I am holding the lamp.”

So the story ends with the youngest brother leaving, perhaps never, ever to return. With his flight he breaks his mother’s heart, and he insults the pride of the orderly and bossy eldest son. In so many ways, Gide’s story is a sad re-telling.

But then, we must ask ourselves, what had passed between the Prodigal and the Father?

Remember, before the Prodigal had spoken to the Elder Brother, before he spoken to his mother and then his younger brother, he had first gone in to see his Father. And the Father had tried to do what he thought he must do—chide the son for leaving the house, breaking the laws of the family.

“My son,, why did you leave me?” he asks.

“Did I really leave you? Father, are you not everywhere? Never did I cease loving you.”

“Were you happy, then, far from me?” the Father asks.

Very significantly, the Prodigal replies, “I did not feel far from you. I have told you. I never loved you better than in the desert. But each morning I was tired of looking for my subsistence...At night, when I was cold, I thought of my tucked-in bed at my Father’s house. When I hungered, I thought of my Father’s home where the abundance of food served always exceeded my hunger.”

“So yesterday’s fatted calf seemed good to you?” the Father asks.

But it as if the Father already knows what the Prodigal will say next, that he will confess, still, to the wild longings of his heart. And unable to lie to his Father, the Prodigal throws himself to the ground, sobbing.

“Father! Father! The wild taste of sweet acorns is still in my mouth. In spite of everything. Nothing could blot out their savor.”

“Poor child,” says the Father as he raises him up, “I spoke to you perhaps too harshly. Your brother wanted me to. Here it is he who makes the *law*. It is he who charged me to say to you ‘Outside of the House there is no salvation for you.’ But listen, it was I who made *you*. I know what is in you. I know what sent you out on your wanderings. I was waiting for you at the end of the road. If you had called me.....I was there.”

What can we take from Gide’s powerful re-telling of this story?

I think it is that neither son is *entitled* to the father’s love. But the father will not with-hold it, not even for the sake of justice. Because love is about unlimited, unmerited giving and forgiving. Because love gives life.

Because the only way to make a person worthy of love is by loving them.

I confess want to write the end of the story and make it be a happy one. I want to have the youngest son, like the Prodigal, return with the father, arms around each other’s shoulders. I want to imagine them dancing one of those folk dances where it’s okay for men to hold each others’ arms and move in time to music as if they were moving in time to love.

I want to write the end of the story, but I can’t. Because Jesus leaves it for each one of us to write our own stories and to live most authentically our truest selves, knowing that God will love us whenever we turn to God.

“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours,” the Father says to the Elder Brother, “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.”

And so God says to us, holding out a hand of immoderate and unfair love. Come and celebrate. Come and join in. Come to the light and the warmth. Come to the table and the laughter and the dancing.

Amen.