

The Prodigals
 Luke 15:1-2, 11-32
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Last week we began our series on Kingdom parables by looking at the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin. In these first two stories, the shepherd and the woman search diligently for something they had lost. This morning's story is a bit more complicated, because it involves people who exercise their free will and limit the power of the father.

This parable is most commonly called the prodigal son. But I think this story is mistitled. I call it the Prodigals plural. Why? Well when we think about a prodigal, we think about the younger son, who leaves home, behaves poorly, then makes his way back home. The older son is lost in his own way. But a prodigal can also be defined as one who spends money or resources freely and recklessly; or one who gives lavishly. If we add in this second definition, the Father also joins the ranks of the prodigals

Here is another reason why this story is mistitled. How does it begin? There was a man who had two sons. Where should our focus be then? On the father. If we focus only on the younger son ó we cut off half the story and miss much of what this parable has to offer.

The first half of the story does focus on the younger son. Have you ever thought about the fact that there are a number of stories in Scripture where the younger son is the favorite ó or at least favored?

- Cain and Abel
- Ishmael and Isaac
- Esau sells Jacob his birthright for a bowl of stew and Jacob tricks his Father out of the blessing
- Joseph and his older brothers
- King David was the youngest in his family and
- King Solomon was the second son born to David and Bathsheba

Because the younger sons are so often the favorites, it is likely that the scribes and Pharisees will initially identify with the younger son ó we all want to think we are the favorite, right? It won't be long however, until this identification will make them uncomfortable. Here's why: The younger son had the right to request his inheritance ó but if he did, he was expected to keep it and use it to care for his father. But as is sometimes true of young people ó he learned to demand his rights before he learned to value his relationships ó and his actions when he receives his money damages some of those relationships.

“Father, Give me my inheritance,” the younger son says. Although this request is not unusual, it seems unwise for the father to grant it. From a legacy standpoint, in the first century, your wealth was tied to your land holdings, and Israelites viewed their land as a gift from God. It is possible that the father did not have enough liquid assets to meet his son's demand, and that he would have to sell some of this.

Furthermore, isn't this unwise from a purely fiscal perspective? What if the futures market crashes? What if the father decides not to buy long-term care insurance and ends up with dementia? Who agrees to give up 1/3 to 1/2 of their nest egg when the future is so uncertain?

Finally, as parents, we know how our children manage their money don't we? One of ours is a saver ó the older one, and our younger one tends to be a spender. I imagine that the father had more than an inkling of what his son might do, but he grants the request anyway. By giving up this much of his estate lavishly and even recklessly, he fits the definition of a prodigal.ⁱ

It seems that the father values his son's freedom more than his own security.ⁱⁱ So, the text tells us, he literally divided his “Bios”- his life ó between his sons. The younger son takes his inheritance and sets off on his grand adventure. Even if this story weren't so familiar, we would bet that this wasn't going to end well. And sure enough it doesn't. About the time the younger son burns through the last of the money, a famine strikes and he finds himself in a foreign country broke, hungry and alone. He gets so desperate that he hires

himself out to pig farmer. He is so hungry he wants to eat the pods he was feeding the pigs. He hits rock bottom.

Finally, the story goes, he came to himself. (PAUSE) But what exactly does this mean? It occurs to him that his Father's servants have plenty to eat and a good roof over their heads, and he decides to go home and ask his father to take him back as a hired hand. This much is clear. What scholars debate about is his sincerity. Most often when we read this story, we hear, "He came to his senses, he had a change of heart, his confession is sincere."

However, a number of scholars don't let the young prodigal off the hook so easily. For them, the phrase "came to himself" means that he reclaimed his true nature as an overly indulged and favored son, who is pretty certain his father will continue to do as he asks.ⁱⁱⁱ With this in mind, listen to the son's confession.

If he truly sees himself as a servant or a slave, he would have addressed his father as Sir, or Master. But how does he begin as confession, "Father." He still views himself as a son, he is not questioning the relationship. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you," he begins. One scholar notes that this is the same phrase that Pharaoh used with Moses during the plagues. We all know how sincere Pharaoh was. "Father I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." David Butterick imagines this thought in the son's head, "I will go to Daddy and sound religious."^{iv} (PAUSE) Is he sincere or not? What do you think?

In the end, it doesn't matter, because while he is still a long way off, his father sees him coming. (When are you aware of something way off down the road? Only when you're looking. How many times a day, each and every day, did that father pause from what he was doing to glance down the road, just in case? How many nights did he leave the porch light on and look out one more time before he went to bed, just in case? How many days did he meet a traveling caravan, hoping for word, just in case?) And then one day, the father glances

up, and there he is. His son is thinner, his hair and beard have grown long, his clothes are tattered, but there is no mistaking it. It's him.

In the blink of an eye, tools are dropped in the field, chores forgotten as the Father runs down the road to meet his son. Filled with compassion, he embraces the son he feared he had lost forever. Instantly, the father calls for his best robe and his ring and new sandals for his son's feet. He instructs the servants to start the prime rib and invite all the neighbors so he is throwing the party of the decade. (PAUSE)

The party over the return of the sinner doesn't sit well with older brother does it? And honestly, who can blame him? Remember last week, we asked what the first step was in recovering something that is lost? Realizing that something or someone is missing in the first place. No one even thinks to go out into the field to tell the elder brother that junior is home or no one goes out to bring him in for the party. No one realizes he is missing. He only finds out when he comes in on his own, he only finds out when he finishes his labor or which, by the way, he has done for his father every day that his younger brother has been who know where doing who know what. He's been there for the long haul. In his faithfulness, he's not like most of the other brothers we see in the biblical stories. Unlike Cain he doesn't murder his brother, unlike Ishmael he is not described as a wild ass of man. Unlike Esau he doesn't threaten to murder his brother who has gotten his share of the blessing. Unlike Joseph's siblings, he doesn't plot his demise or sell him into slavery.^v

We don't know what the older brother thought when he showed up to a party in full swing. But who could blame him if his thoughts went something like this, "And who is funding this party I didn't even know about?, I am. Whose fatted calf are they eating? Mine. Whose wine are they drinking? Mine. It's **my** inheritance everyone is enjoying tonight. Junior squandered his portion, and now he's home to start on mine." (PAUSE)

Honestly.

And money notwithstanding (it is still his father's money after all), where is the tough love? Where are the consequences? Where is the moral instruction about reaping what you sow? The older brother isn't upset by the younger brother's return, or by his father's forgiveness, it's the joy and celebration he can't stomach. Where is the justice???? On principal, he refuses to join the party. (PAUSE)

Have you ever been caught in the middle of a conflict at a family reunion or wedding? Have you ever had to mediate between disgruntled family members ó feeling torn between your joy and your duties as host of the party and the pull towards the unhappy relative? That's how I picture the father. But he knows what he has to do. He has just found one son, and now he realizes he is in danger of losing the other. In a breach of etiquette, he leaves his guests and goes outside to plead with his older son.

The older son is so angry by this point that he cannot even claim the younger brother as his sibling. Did you notice his words to his father? "When this son of **yours** came back who had devoured your property with prostitutes (the text never tells us that by the way ó is this what the older brother has imagined ó has he embellished the story) ó you kill the fatted calf for **him**."

And once again, we see the father's compassion. "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." This brother of yours --you see, the father knows that one cannot be a son, without also being a brother.^{vi}

This is hard stuff friends. If we are honest, we often want mercy for ourselves, but justice for everyone else, don't we. And not the kind of justice that Micah 6:8 talks about either. If most of us are honest, the extravagant love of God violates our sense of what is right. Too often we claim the world's standards as our own ó where justice is lauded over mercy.

But these stories, like any good parable, turn everything upside down. For here, in contrast to the way things should be mercy is more important than justice, and grace, abundance, and joy are more important than anger and consequences. Here wayward children are unconditionally welcomed home by loving parents.

Is there a place for discipline and accountability of course? Do we reap what sow? Usually. And more often than not there *are* consequences for actions.

But here is the good news of the gospel today. Every time God's active, searching, healing love finds someone and calls them back home, it doesn't mean that there is less for those of who never left. It means there is more. More wine, more feasting, more music, more dancing. It means another, bigger party, where everyone is welcome at the table. In God's economy, there is always more than enough.

Typically when we hear this parable taught or preached, we are asked which brother we identify with, and that's a valid question. But this morning, what would it look like to identify with the father of after all this story is about him to start with.

In your biological family or in our church family who might be lost? Is it someone who has taken their resources and literally left, or is it someone who is sitting in the room, feeling unloved and unappreciated? Think about our larger world. The descendants of Ishmael and Isaac remain at odds. Many of the rest of us can identify persons or groups of people we'd rather not welcome to our neighborhood party. What if we were willing to do whatever it took to reach out to all of God's children, to invite them to the table and party like crazy when they arrive? After all, they are all a part of the family, and things just aren't complete without them.

ⁱ A my Jill Levin, *Short Stories by Jesus*, New York, Harper Collins, 2014, p. 48

ⁱⁱ This thought is from Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, "The Prodigal Father" published in *The Preaching Life*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 53.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 54.

^v *Ibid.*, 62.

^{vi} *Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, p. 304.