

Three Parables: I. The Prodigal Son
Text: Luke 15:11-32

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I have spent nearly a lifetime studying, enjoying, and even laughing out loud at the Parables in both the Old and the New Testaments. We think of this parabolic teaching mainly in the unforgettable stories of Jesus, but the technique actually arose first in the rich tradition of the Hebrews Scriptures. While there are a plethora of formal definitions which can be mostly pedantic and often obfuscating to the average reader, I define “a parable” as simply “A story, true or fictional, which makes an important religious or moral point.” (Repeat) “A story, true or fictional, which makes an important religious or moral point.” At its most successful, it draws you into the story as you read it or hear it, without noticing at first that it really is a story about you, not them. As Robert Burns wrote: “Oh wad some power the giftie gie us, to see ourselves as ithers see us.” (Robert Burns, “To a Louse”)

While they are not as widely known, some of those early Old Testament parables ring the bell of eternal truth. Like, each election year I return to the innocent looking parable in Judges 9:8-20. Do you know it? Jotham was displeased that Abimelech had been chosen as a compromise candidate to be the new Judge, or King of Israel. He might have written a long treatise and read it word by word, but he stood up on Mt. Gerazim and told them a story, a parable about the time the trees of the forest decided to anoint a king to rule over them. They went to the Oak tree and the Cypress and the fig tree and even to the hanging grape vine and asked each of them to take the job. They all refused because they said they were too busy with other important things. So the trees finally went down to the bramble bush with all of its thorns and snares, and asked him to rule. The bramble agreed immediately and invited the whole committee to take refuge in his shade, until the ground caught fire one day, and they were all consumed. A King should never be chosen by default. It seemed funny at the time; but Jotham was not laughing.

Or in II Samuel 12, after David had stolen the wife of Uriah while the latter was on the front lines of battle for his King, Nathan the prophet went to see him. Rather than rant and rave about his cruel and deadly deed and inciting David’s fury, Nathan told the King a little story: There were two men in a certain city. One was extremely rich with flocks and fields and a ton of money. The other was poor as a church mouse. All he had to his name was one little ewe lamb, who had become a family pet and even played with the man’s children. Then one day, unbelievably, the rich man came and stole the poor man’s only little lamb and served it up at dinner time to a traveling companion. Oh dear. When he heard the story, King David was furious. He shouted to Nathan: “That man deserves to die, for he had no pity. Kill him and give some of his flocks to the poor man!” Nathan looked at him, in one of the most challenging scenes in the Bible, and declared the famous words: “King David, Thou art the man!” Then, David said to Nathan: “I have sinned before the Lord.” And he wept. Remember, a parable is a story, true or fictional, which draws you in without your noticing that you are the one it is talking about.

While there are a plethora of formal definitions, many of which are pedantic and even obfuscate the issue, I define a “Parable” as simply “A story, true or fictional, which makes an important religious or moral point.” At its most successful, it draws you into the story as you read or hear it, without noticing at first that it is really a story about you, not them. As Robert Burns wrote: “Oh wad some power the giftie give us, to see ourselves as ithers see us.” (To a Louse)

There are 39 actual parables in the Gospels, if you’re counting, even as many as 80 in some elaborate summaries. All of them are in the first three Gospels. John does not contain a single parable. There are explanations for the variety, but they need not detain us here. 29 of the parables are in only one of the Gospels. Luke has by far the most, 28; while little Mark has only 9. Matthew includes 20, half of which are exclusive to his Gospel. 17, meanwhile, are exclusive to Luke; including most of the best know parables, like The Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son, The Great Supper, The Lost Coin, and The Faithful Steward. Luke, it would seem, was fascinated with this technique in the teaching of Jesus.

The best known, and perhaps the greatest short story of all time, is the Parable we have chosen for the first in our series of three parables this summer: The Parable of the Prodigal Son. That is what we call it in The United States. In other places it is called “The Parable of the Two Sons”, or “The Parable of the Loving Father”, which is actually more accurate as a description of the story. It is also called The Parable of the Lost Son.

Let me tell you the story briefly from my vantage point, and intermingle it with the sermon of the morning. I promise to offer a little concluding statement for you, just in case you doze off while I am speaking. Norman Vincent Peale once chided that he did not mind it when some of his listeners fell asleep. For that meant that at least they were feeling comfortable in his presence, as opposed to the rush-about world where everything else is so stressful. “You cannot fall asleep in a New York City taxi-cab.” Touché.

In Luke 15, the Prodigal Son follows two other parables of things that got lost: first is the Shepherd who had a hundred sheep. When he lost one of them in the wilderness, he left the 99 and went off to find the One. When he found it he carried it home on his shoulders and rejoiced with his neighbors when he got there. The second is about the woman who had ten silver coins and losing one, she scoured the house frantically and diligently, forsaking all else, until she found it. When she did, she called her neighbors in and they also had a party. Then comes the Parable of the Lost Son.

It goes like this: A certain man had two sons. Now stop and think about how fortunate he was. Some couples never have a son at all. Others are not privileged to have children, for a variety of reasons. This man had two sons. I remember a couple, friends of ours in Scotland who could never have children. One day the husband told me, “When we look around and see the grief that some children cause their parents, we are just as happy without them. But when we see the joy that some children bring to their parents, we are kind of envious.”

This man had two sons. Let’s say it clearly and unequivocally, once and for all, whatever would happen from the days those boys were born until the day he or they left the earth, however much grief and trouble they ever caused him, it was better to have had those sons than not to have them at all.

**I hold it true what’re befall
I feel it when I sorrow most.
‘Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all.**

Tennyson

Notice it says that a certain man had two sons - but now, just wait a minute! I know what Luke meant, but to be correct and blunt, no MAN ever had two sons. No man ever had even one son, or one daughter. You might say that the certain man entertained his wife a couple of times, hopefully, and the certain man’s wife had two sons. He played with them and bounced them on his knee when they were well behaved. Once in a while he deigned to wake his wife up when he heard them crying in the middle of the night. (My Peggy says I actually used to do that. Can you imagine?) He probably prayed for them in Church and likely he scolded them when they sat in his chair or borrowed his bow and arrow; but no Man ever had one son, let alone two. Just to be accurate. The certain man’s wife is not heard from in the story, and that is a most notable omission.

And, as is true in most families, the boys were different: same parents, same household, same genes, same love, same food, same discipline, and still the boys end up different. The Scripture says only that one was younger and one was older. By all standards, the Elder brother was a good son. He had never disobeyed his father, as far as we know. All his life long he managed to be right and good and proper. He knew his part and played it well. He was the one the parents could depend upon. If he didn’t smile enough, that was all right; after all, he slaved away all day managing the farm. If he was sometimes seemed distant, it was only because he lived so much within himself, and he didn’t mix too well in social company. But he could be trusted. He was no doubt a pillar of the local synagogue. People counted on him to get the job done: The Elder Brothers....we could not live without them.

The other, the younger one, was in trouble all the time. Rebellion does not start when one decides to leave the home at twenty-one. One exasperated father told me years ago: “That boy has been impossible to manage ever since we brought him home from the hospital.” He was irresponsible.

Have you ever heard the story of the little urchin who got in trouble in school, whose father told him that he had to learn to be responsible? “Responsible”, he shouted back; “I’m responsible. Every time something goes wrong up at the school, everybody says that I’m responsible!”

The younger son’s life could never match his enthusiasm with reality. He was a likeable little scamp alright, as they said of Huckleberry Finn, “He had all of the vices except the unforgivable ones, and none of the virtues except the essential ones.” It seems certain that in spite of it all, his father loved him, a lot.

The day came, the Bible says, when he decided to leave home. Can’t you hear the echo of the arguments? “Hey, Dad, I’m fed us! Enough of this; I can’t stand the criticism any more. I don’t like it on the farm. It’s boring around here. I want to make something of my life. I want to be on my own.” So away he went.

But our Lord had a good sense of humor: just to prove that times never change, before the boy ran away he went to his father and asked him for some money. In those days as the younger son, he was entitled to one-third of the family fortune, but he would not have normally received it until his father passed away. But here the father gave it to him anyway. The young man took it, converted it to cash. The father could have kept the money until he died. What the boy was saying is “I can’t wait for you to die. I want my inheritance now.”

I actually knew a family a long time ago and far away, where the elder son hired a skillful lawyer to break the Trust his father had set up for him. The father had set aside a great deal of money, partly for tax and estate reasons, but also to prepare the son for adulthood. The young man received a generous income from the trust. But, he wasn’t satisfied. He wanted it all. His father could have prevented it, but he let his son have it. It hurt him too much to think of going to court. “The real pity is,” he said: “The little lout can’t wait until I die! Let him have it!”

But anyway, with his pockets full of his father’s money, the younger son waved good-bye and left, probably for Damascus, maybe even Rome, although the Bible does not say.

Do you ever wonder why he went? I mean you really couldn't blame it on the father. I am sure the father felt guilty, trying to figure out what he did wrong. You could blame it on the boy's selfishness. The other son stayed home and it didn't seem so bad for him. You dare not blame it on the unmentioned mother because she was there doing the chores around the house, making the meals, providing a comfortable home for all of them. If you are looking for blame, it would have to be in the demands of that boy's inner psyche. His soul called out for something different than the farm, and away he went – big and brave and brash and bold.

But, deep down he wasn't big and brave and bold at all. He was afraid of things inside himself that he did not understand. Behind the façade of every big, brave, loud-mouthed kid I have ever met, there is a little boy or girl who is scared. I think he was frightened of that power which was driving him away. If you had asked him why, I don't think he could have answered. I have often talked to young men when they are on the way down that road. Their parents send them to me. Sometimes their young wives send them. Sometimes they even come themselves. And while they strut across the stage as would be actors, they keep trying to figure out why they are there. Anyway, the younger son wasted his inheritance and went broke.

To make matters worse, a famine came up in that land and the only work he could find was on a gentile foreign farm, feeding the pigs. He couldn't catch a break no how. Feeding swine was anathema for a Jew: pigs are cloven footed creatures and a good Jew was forbidden to touch them, let alone feed them. The Talmud says bluntly: "Cursed be the one who mingles with the swine." And, if you have ever lived on a farm, you know what it's like in a pig sty. He looked around, and as it reads in old King James Bible, "He would feign have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat. And no one gave him anything." Oh dear. Then, as the New English Bible says, "He came to his senses and he set out for his father's house." I read somewhere that the prophet Jonah was drunk with self importance, but three days and nights in the belly of a whale is enough to sober anybody up." Same with this boy, in the pig sty he came to his senses, and he decided to head home.

Isn't it cute the way the Scripture says how he rehearsed his lines all the way home? "How shall I say it?" Have you ever tried to think up an apology for someone you love? You want it to be just right: "I'm sorry, honey, things just got out of control, and one thing led to another and it all escalated, and I'm sorry." "Hey, Dad, I didn't mean to break the window. Davy Heron threw the ball; but I promise not to do it again." Or to a friend: "Gee whiz, I don't know what got into me. I value your friendship and there I went and said all those things. It wasn't me." You know what I mean....don't you?

He chose the words, “Father I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” Good line. And off he went practicing them all the way home. As he drew near the house, and came around the bend of that old familiar road, his Father saw him afar off. He had wandered out to that gate about ten times a day, for years. The last thing he did each and every night was pray for that boy. “Lord, please keep him safe from harm and danger, and bring him back to me.”

If you have ever had a son or a father who was away and then came home, from the military or whatever you know what that means. A son is lost in the world and all of a sudden he comes back. I know a family where the son actually returned after years in Colombia during which they had not heard one thing from him. When they found out he was coming, the mother was pleased, but the father was fearful. What do you say: “Hey, boy, where you been? What happened? What made you leave and what brought you back?” The Dad was still angry. He wanted to say, “I told you so, lad, the only way to live life is to be dependable.”

What are you going to say or do even if your son has shamed you or done something wrong and you see him heading home from the top of the hill? You say, “Thank God, he’s home.” How could a father who prayed for that boy every night say anything else? And so they had a party, a big one, and almost everybody was happy. The father ran out to meet him and told the servants to prepare the finest dinner that old house had ever seen.

Think about it for a minute: do you think the father was right? He knew he should be wary – this boy had no doubt tricked him before. He planned to be cautious; but when the time came, he couldn’t do it. He didn’t know how to be cautious with his children. He went flat out for them, all the time! He always told them that if they had trouble they could come to him. And they listened. So of course he ran out to meet the boy – outlandish behavior for an ancient Jewish father. And his repentant son never got to speak his lines. The father had heard enough already. He will not only be my son again, he will be a special guest of the house. Put my best robe on him. Kill the fatted calf. Give him the family ring! (Whoops! Careful father, that ring normally belongs to the eldest son, who remember, is out in the field working the farm so they can eat a fatted calf.)

Meanwhile, that older son is coming in from a hard day of work in the fields just as the party was about to begin. No one had bothered to go out and tell him the good news that his little brother was back. His first inkling came when he heard the music as the band warmed up for the dance. How do you think he should have felt? Relieved that the boy was home safe after all those years away? That brotherly love and affection would finally come to the

fore and he would drop the sibling rivalry and wrap his arms around little Johnny and even shed a wee tear?

No. No, siree! He was mad as a wet hen. In fact, he was so angry, and jealous, he would not even go into the house. His father came out and begged him. Then and there he tipped his hand: "Father," he cried, "All these years I have worked for you like a slave. I have never disobeyed your orders, and you never threw a party for me. But, that little wastrel of yours, who wasted all his money on loose living and prostitutes, comes back home and you give him a robe and a ring, and you kill our best calf for his party!" He was so wrapped up within himself and his duties. Older brothers often envy younger ones, whether it was fair or not. Brothers are funny.

If you women and girls listening feel left out, I hasten to remind you that there is a similar story in the Bible of two sisters, Mary and Martha. They were different too. When Jesus came to visit them in Bethany, Martha, the elder sister was busy taking care of the chores, tidying up the house, rushing about, preparing the meal. Mary, being true to her casual, spontaneous attitude, (She lived for the moment.) just sat down at the feet of Jesus and listened with rapt attention. The girls were different, too. Martha complained to Jesus that Mary should be more helpful because she had to do all the work. Jesus scolded Martha for missing time with him and busying herself in the kitchen. Same dynamic: if Martha had not busied herself with the preparations, there would have been no meal for the three of them to eat. Sisters are funny. My old friend in Scotland always says, "Families are funny..."

Now before we close, I have a question. Where do you see yourself in the story? Most of us would not identify with the younger son. Not everyone within the sound of my voice, but most all of us are past-masters at playing it safe, doing it right, hiding behind the rules. Most of us - most of the time. Would you admit to being an Elder brother who worked hard and was dutiful, but lacked the one essential component of being like Jesus – unconditional, forgiving love? Probably not.

Or would you want to say that you are the loving and forgiving Father at the top of the hill. Hmmmmm. I don't know. I try to be. And, I would not quarrel if you said you were. God bless you. But it is a precarious position to choose. Let me give you two quick examples, although I could give you fifty:

Years ago a father called me one evening and asked me to come over and speak to them about their son. The young man had just come home, I will say from graduate school, and told them he was homosexual, gay we would say nowadays. They were shocked. They

said they never had an inkling. And they kept telling him to find a girl friend and get married. He told his parents that he did not choose to be different. In fact he said that he would rather he was not. His father didn't know what to do or say. When I arrived, he told me he thought that behavior was sinful, as the Bible says it is, he said. And he didn't know if he could allow his son back into his house. "Could you help us?" he asked me.

Now, what would you have answered? This is what I said, and what I still say when I am asked. I said, "Do you love your son?" "Of course I do", he snapped back, "but what he is doing is sinful?" I said that if he loved his son, he had to start there, stay there and end there. By the way, the son went to church regularly; he believed in Jesus Christ; he tried to live a Christian life. I mentioned that if he were the Loving Father in the Parable, he would welcome the boy home willingly, talk to and listen to what he had to say, and be open to learn something from and about his son.

Or briefly, 30 years ago or so, I was asked to talk some sense into the young couple who came home to her house, to tell the bewildered parents that they wanted to get married, and they wanted me to perform the ceremony in our church. The girl was pretty, but disheveled some in the pattern of those years. The young man had long dreadlock hair half way down his back. He happened to be an African-American, but that is only tangentially important to the story. Anyone with eyes to see would have concluded that this couple did not have a good shot at a happy Christian marriage. They said they believed in the "God of the Earth and the Sky."

The Father said he wanted to throw them out of the house, but meanwhile, he asked me what he should do. I said, "Do you love your daughter?" He said, "Of course." I said, "Then you must begin and stay and end there." You should to listen to her, perhaps for the first time, pray for her, and walk with her along this road, wherever it leads. Tell her you love her. I promised to meet with the couple alone to see what I could do to help figure things out.

In one way, the Father in the Parable is really stupid, if we evaluate him on our own worldly standards. I mean the kid took his money and squandered it on harlots and gambling and drinking and carousing with gentiles. Why on earth would he close his eyes to that and throw a party? Rebellious children never change. How can you be so naïve, and stupid? You already have one good son, why worry about this one? After the party is over he will probably ask for some more money and run away again. Too risky for a father to have the wool pulled over his eyes.

But wait a minute: the father in the story represents God, our heavenly father. The Bible says that all of us have sinned and fall short of his glory: not one of us is worthy to enter

the kingdom on our own merit. We have to hop up into the arms of Jesus and ask him to forgive us and carry us over into the presence of the Almighty.

And remember, we used to exclude people who got divorced, or colored, or lepers, or cripples, and even women were told that they were not equal in God's sight.

Who do we think we are, as if we had all the answers, we elder brothers and sisters. "This is the way we do it here!" I was told the other day at Sharon. But you and I do not determine who gets into the kingdom and who does not. The Keys to the Kingdom belong to Jesus Christ alone and he alone opens the door for whomever he chooses, not we.

The parable is telling us that the time comes when each of us has to come to the realization that we cannot make it on our own, when we have to acknowledge that God is the only resource left who can do anything to help us. When you have no where else to turn, turn towards home, this home, the one where the loving father is standing out by the gate waiting for you. Our first step back is the admission we do not have the power to accomplish it by ourselves, we need the Lord God Almighty, who came down to live among us in the form of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Where do you see yourself? Are you able to forgive; better are you able to accept forgiveness? Or, are you so wedded to your work, or your prestige, or your way of doing things, or your need to be right, or the way things used to be, that you are jealous and angry when God decides to share his loving-kindness with someone of whom you do not approve?

God offers to every man the right to come home, and every woman too, and every child, to come home in the name of Jesus Christ who came to offer that forgiveness; that wherever we have strayed, beyond whatever walls we place between us and that love, Christ leaps across them and reaches out for us, one by one. The father is waiting. One of his sons ran away to a foreign country. The other one ran away to the fields of self righteousness. He never left the farm, but he equally left the household of God. He had a time of it, that father, who had two sons.

We're done, halleluiah. But before we go, I need to share one last idea with you, tiny one. I need to leave you with one last little insight, one it took me years to comprehend, but I do now. (Are you listening?) The longer the father knew those two boys, the more he thought about all their apparent differences, the more he prayed for each of them....presto....the more he realized how much they were the same, and how much he loved them both. For now and forever more, Amen.

