

Not the Prodigal Son

“Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons...’” Uh oh. Here we go. TROUBLE. It’s THAT parable. The trouble begins before we even get to the parable. The trouble begins with the name. Most of us know this story as “The Prodigal Son.” We hear that name and we are flooded with images, memories, emotions, old sermons, even famous paintings. But as any first-year seminarian learns, it’s the WRONG title for this parable. The son in question – the youngest son in the story – may rightly be described as “prodigal” – meaning “given to extravagant or reckless expenditure.” Yes, he squandered his inheritance. But that does not appear to be the chief point of the story. It is his lostness, and his subsequent return, that grabs at our heart strings and makes the scene for famous paintings. Hence the tradition of calling this parable “The Lost Son,” where it fits in nicely with the two parables that precede it: The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin.

Aha! Trouble again. It fits nicely. Anyone who studies the gospels, who interacts seriously with this rabble-rousing Jesus fellow, knows that things do not fit nicely. On the contrary this Jesus, his radical gospel, and his surprising and wonderfully hyperbolic parables do not fit into any normal human conception of what life is about. Yes, the son is lost. Like the sheep, he has wandered away from his shepherd into the wilderness. Like the coin,

he has been misplaced amidst the dirt and rubble of the household floor. Unlike either of these, this wayward son bears some culpability for his actions. He is human after all, not a beast or an inanimate object, and the parable paints a picture of his willfulness in colorful language. By demanding his share of the property during his father's lifetime, he is declaring his independence. He wants to get out! Cut the apron strings! See the wide world away from the annoying supervision of the parental units. Does that sound like every other 17- or 18-year old you know?

This wayward son, true to the worst in his adolescent human nature, wanders into the glittering Diaspora and squanders every drachma in a far-off Gentile land, living the high life as only a squirrely 17 year old can. At this point so reduced is he in circumstances that he is forced to care for the very unkosher pigs, unable to observe the most rudimentary requirements of Jewish life. At this point, he hits bottom – or, as the text says –“he came to himself.” This is the classic Hebrew expression of repentance. And thus follows the familiar and moving story of his return home, and the loving and unconditional embrace of his father, who cries out in his joy: “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” No wonder we love this parable! Who among us has not become lost, wandered willfully away from the path, come to among the piggy muck and desired with all his

heart to return home? Who among us has not felt the bitter remorse of a squandered opportunity? Who among us, even as an adult, has not felt again like an awkward adolescent, longing to pour out our woes into a welcoming parental embrace? Who among us, in the midst of some dark wood, some wilderness of a too-long Lent, has not recognized the face of the lost son as her own?

But it doesn't fit. It's too simple. Because you see, the parable does not end there. And this reminds us of an important point about parables – they are an uniquely Eastern storytelling form. From its earliest days the church has been trying to force them into a western mindset: categorizing, explaining, allegorizing. To do this to a parable is to abuse it and strip it of its punch. The parables of Jesus, with their exaggerations and colorful descriptions and surprising details, are not literary devices at all. Each parable, in its original setting, was a story he made up on the spot, in the midst of some actual situation or conflict. Their elements of surprise were meant to shock his listeners into apprehending some important truth. These parables are the weapons of controversy, in which Jesus is defending his radical gospel against those who found it scandalous. In the words of the great German scholar Jeremias, “More than with any other words of the New

Testament, we are standing right in front of Jesus when hearing his parables.”

So what do we hear in this particular parable, so difficult now to name? With such a moving tale of waywardness, repentance and return, why doesn't Jesus simply end it there? Because this lost son's tale, moving as it may be, is only the background for the point of the story, represented by the attitude of the older son when his younger brother returns. Some have even suggested calling the parable “The Parable of the Angry Brother.” This is closer to the mark. In this second half of the parable Jesus is responding to an actual situation. He is speaking, in fact, to a group of men who were just like this older brother: righteous, smug, aloof, offended at the easy grace and inclusiveness of Jesus' gospel. These are of course the Pharisees – the religious officials of Jesus' day who could not abide his cozy fellowship with obvious sinners. Like the older brother in the story, these Pharisees believe they have earned more of God's favor than others who have wandered from the narrow righteous path.

There is no question that it is the Pharisees whom Jesus is addressing in this series of parables, chiding them for their lack of love for the lost. And don't we love to chide them ourselves, those nasty snide judgmental Pharisees, rubbing our hands with glee as Jesus upbraids them time and

again? But who are the Pharisees? This parable, true to its surprising form, turns on itself and turns on us. As soon as we decide to settle here, in our judgment of those self-righteous Pharisees, we must count ourselves among their number. As soon as we move on from our identification with the lost son, look up from our lostness and peek out from within our father's embrace – the moment we cease to revel in that loving circle and make judgment on the expression of our approaching brother – we lose our place in the story. And that is, perhaps, exactly how Jesus intended it.

Jesus knows us too well. He knew his disciples and their human foibles back then and he knows us today. Back then it was the tax collectors and the prostitutes the religious folks wanted to shut out of God's kingdom. Who is it today? Is it our gay brothers and sisters, shut out of full inclusiveness by the Anglican Communion? Is it our conservative and evangelical members, whom we deride for their traditional interpretation of Scripture? As Jesus says elsewhere to another judging crowd: "Let him who is without sin, cast the first stone."

Jesus knows us so well. That's why he tells this parable. It is not chiefly about a prodigal younger son or about a son who gets lost. It is not really about an older brother, seething with self-righteous anger. If we are honest, we see ourselves in both. Finally this parable is about the welcoming

love of God for all of these human characters, a love that is so radically welcoming as to be beyond any story's capacity for description. The love of God is greater, higher, broader and deeper than any of us can begin to comprehend. So stop trying, says Jesus. Stop trying to do God's job. Stop judging, analyzing, criticizing, weighing. Stop. Breathe. Be. Simply receive the embrace, if you can, and keep your eyes closed. You will feel the huddle of other bodies beside you, and you will hear the sound of other breaths drawn. Who is in there with you, in the divine embrace? Are they sinners? Are they Pharisees? Are they bishops? Are they gay or straight or trans-gendered? Are they just like you? All that matters is that you are there, in the divine love, and together with all God's children, you have at last come home.