

Luke 15:11-32 Running Across the Distance
March 27, 2022

I would be easy to hear the Parable of the Prodigal Son and its sequel as a story regarding a man who had two sons, and to see it only for the way it speaks to similar circumstances in personal relationships as we have experienced them. It would be easy to dismiss any thought of larger meaning, of its implications for the biblical understanding of what it means to be a human being; how to understand God, and what it means to be in relation to God. Let us take the harder road.

To begin, dualities are sometimes helpful. They have a power to aid in the understanding of larger realities by making categories of polar opposites, like the faithful and the unfaithful, the righteous and the unrighteous, the good and the evil.

They are, however, not very accurate in the sense that life/world is not experienced in dualities. There are more than two categories, and there are grey areas, where things may not actually be as clear as they are made to seem when we think in strictly either/or terms. Binary code is a real thing, but life does not happen in binary code.

You are familiar with the story. A man who had an inheritance to give, as by no means all people do, had two sons. The younger son was not interested in a relationship with his father and wanted his share so he could play the world. The father decided not to wait

until he was dead, and divided the inheritance between them.

The younger son went on a spending spree and lost it all through reckless living, and came to ruin. Sometimes, when a story has two parts like this one does, there is a trajectory, the first story is a setup that leads to an emphasis on the second. That may be true here, but because the first story by itself has so much power, we must not only give attention to it on its own terms, but are forced to confess that when we think of the prodigal son, we almost always think *only* of the younger, rather than the older.

While feeding pigs, because that is what his life had come to, the younger son a brainwave of sorts and realized that he had a better life at home, so he decided to return. There is an interesting development that arises. On the way home he rehearses an apology, and the impression is given, and often, I think, received, that the father in the story forgives the son because of that apology.

That is the way I understood the scene until I read an interpretation by Frederick Buechner, who pointed out that the father saw the young man from a distance, and was so filled with compassion, that it was *only after* he had run to him and thrown his arms around him and kissed him, that the apology was given. The apology doesn't seem to have been acknowledged. "Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Kill the fatted calf and celebrate." Unbroken

The son, who *was willing* to be a hired hand, was a son again. It is a very majestic scene, and one that is all the more amazing because most of the time most of us are not willing to forgive so completely and spontaneously. We like to wait for apologies.

Of course, there *is* a sequel to the story. The elder, more dutiful son, already resentful his brother squandered part of the family fortune, and even more because his brother turned out to be so much less deserving, refuses to celebrate with his family. Upon his absence from the celebration, the father goes to him as well. When the whole thing plays out he is small, childish, and ungrateful.

He complains that *he* never had the fatted calf. He represents the efforts of everyone who tries to earn what can only be given, what can only be received. Perhaps the most surprising thing about the elder brother is that he is told by his father that he has already been given everything. “Everything I have is yours,” his father tells him.

If it is true that the first part of the parable serves to bring an emphasis to the second, then we ought to pay close attention here. Much of the time it is we, the faithful and dutiful religious people who are most identified as elder brothers. This is a parable about us, the petty selfishness, the resentment. One wonders if the reason for the over-emphasis on the younger sibling is not so much because it is a beautiful story, but to deflect attention away from ourselves.

“We had to celebrate and be glad, for this brother of yours was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found again.” One wonders who was more lost, the brother who left for a strange country, or the one who stayed and got lost in his own home.

It is clear that this story has meaning beyond the individual interpretation. It goes beyond the old idea that it applies to the Jews and Gentiles of the biblical context. The world is filled with elder brothers and their prodigal siblings. The father is God, and the world is the brothers; some religious and dutiful, some libertine and rebellious. It might be most accurate to say that while all of us are more like the younger brother sometimes, most of the time, we more like the elder.

But the message is the same, God is willing to forgive and accept both brothers. Picture that then, God is this father running across the distance, whether it be great or small, before the apologies have been spoken. God is willing to accept people for the actions of their feet, even if they point them in the direction of home out of desperation and loss instead of a more obedient faith. We must *not* underestimate the power of the grace that presents itself in this parable.

May the prodigal in all of us take better notice of the inheritance that has been given, the gift of life, and be more thankful and responsible, and less self-pre-occupied; and may the older brother in us somehow become more merciful and less demanding, and more grateful for a place in eternity, now and forevermore.

2 Corinthians 5

16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.