

RECEIVE FORGIVENESS THE PARABLE *of the* PRODIGAL SON

*And he said, "There was a man who had two sons."
Luke 15:11*

Over the centuries since Jesus first told this parable, teachers and preachers have focused on the younger son. Yet the way Jesus begins the story and the way the story flows, it is really a story of two sons. Jesus says that right at the start: "There was a man who had two sons" (v. 11). Then he tells the story in two parts, first telling the story of the runaway, the younger son, and then telling us about the older son's refusal to celebrate his brother's homecoming.

I want to challenge you today to identify with both sons in this parable, one wasteful or prodigal, the other proud. Jesus' stories often call us to such a personal identification. When Rembrandt painted his well-known *Return of the Prodigal Son*, many believe he painted himself as the prodigal home again and gently embraced by his father. Shakespeare clearly found inspiration in both sons in this parable as we watch the two sons of the king in *Henry IV*. Now it is your turn.

If there is someone here who is distant from the Lord, someone who has run off with your inheritance, far from the Father's provision and love, you are the foolish prodigal. If there is someone here who has ever hit rock bottom, who has tried everything to rise up from the pigpen, but to no avail, you are the prodigal. And if there is someone here who knows what it means to come to your senses and long for home, someone who believes there is still mercy in God's heart, then you are the prodigal.

To all the prodigals here, all the mercy-beggars, Jesus wants you to know that, like the father in the story, he is willing to humiliate himself to receive you back. He will embrace you, dirty, shoeless and just as you are without one plea. There is nothing you've done that is so evil he won't forgive you. He's waiting for you.. He has suffered for you with a selfless, sacrificial love. You can go home again. He has a celebration planned for you that reaches all the way into heaven. You were dead, but now you are alive. His riches can be yours again, even after this rebellion, even after the next.

So come home.

And the older son is among us, too. We sometimes forget that Jesus told this parable to the good and pious religious leaders of his day. Luke introduces the parables in this chapter of his gospel with the words, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them. So he told them this parable" (Lk 15:1-3). This parable is also for the good and upright among us, those who have stayed close to the Father, working hard for him, staying home.

If there is someone here whose relationship with Jesus has been more a matter of obligation than grateful love, you are the older son. If there is someone here who has been a dutiful member of the church family for so long that you have forgotten the sheer wonder of God's forgiveness, you are the older son. And if all the hard work you have done for the kingdom has left you proud in your faith or resentful, unable to celebrate with the angels a sinner who repents, then you are the older son.

Within us is the older son, a scribe or Pharisee, telling us we have won God's favor by our consistent goodness. We keep the Ten Commandments with just a few minor infractions, and we make up for those by being extra good, extra nice, and extra hardworking. And frankly it grates on us when we see some gross sinner getting in on God's good favor, someone who doesn't look like us or drive cars like ours or live where we do. We raise our eyebrows when somebody we know has their name in the paper for a sin made public. "I thought she was a Christian!" we say, as if we can be saints but never sinners.

Look at how the father works in the story to get his firstborn into the party! How he takes insult and bitterness, and even anger! For this son, too, the Father waits. He waits for the self-righteous to eat with sinners and so be counted as one of them.

Jesus doesn't say how the story ends, but the suggestion one Christian made still haunts me. The story ends, he said, with the older brother going into the party, and once inside, he kills his father." That is what happened in history. The father in the story, Jesus, is killed for the sins of all the sons and daughters of the world. He becomes the son once

dead but now alive again.

Philip Tesch
April 5, 2017
North Highlands, CA