

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Who has heard today's gospel reading before? Who knows it by the title "the prodigal son?" Many people know this story from that perspective based on a section heading in the Bible. We need to remember that the section headings aren't in the original Greek text— they are added by the editor of whatever version of the Bible you're reading. A section heading can help us to better focus on the essence of the reading, but sometimes it can limit our understanding, especially when we read today's parable. A parable is meant to be a story that disarms us, that opens us up to the reality of our world, and that challenges us to see God's reign in a new way. Let's see what we can discover in today's parable.

We heard that there was a younger son who unabashedly asked for his inheritance. Essentially, he wished that his father was dead. It was a request that ended the relationship between the father and the younger son. Remember, the son's inheritance was not money, but rather livestock and mostly land. This land was likely passed down generationally. So, the son's quick liquidation of this land, likely by selling it to gentile outsider, was not only scandalous but also disruptive to the Jewish community. After this liquidation, the young son left town and foolishly spent money on a playboy lifestyle, which is where we get the phrase "prodigal son" or "wasteful son." But, things don't always go as planned and a severe famine hit. In a change of events, the young man's extravagant excess turned to extreme want. But, the son cut himself off from his family and his real security by leaving home.

The safety net provided by his family in terms of his physical and emotional well-being was destroyed. So too, it would be commonplace that the family and the community would disown him because of this act of squandering his money among the gentiles. In the midst of these severed relationships and the fear that he couldn't go back, this young Jewish man took on an unclean and cursed role among the pigs.

Now, when you hit rock bottom, like this young Jewish man, *sometimes* you find a way out. It so happened that this Jewish man remembered how his father's hired hands were treated well. So, he decided to ask his father to be a hired hand so that he would not go hungry and die. To do this, he came up with a planned confession to tell his father that, "I have sinned against heaven and against you." And this statement is something that harkens back to the Hebrew Scriptures. It's a paraphrase of Pharaoh's declaration to Moses to get those nasty plagues to stop. And in that story, we know that Pharaoh was not repentant but simply wanted to stop the suffering.

So, it's hard to tell if the son is sincere or scheming in this story. So, quick poll: do you think the younger son was sincere, scheming, or something else? I want to think of him as sincere, but maybe he simply realized that his father is a sucker. After all, his father already gave him his inheritance and took on that shame within the community! As the Rev. Dr. David Lose says, maybe I want to think of the younger son as sincere because I like to think I'm sincere. I want to believe that I always learn from my mistakes and that when I apologize, I really mean it.¹ But, if you're anything like me, I know

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/03/lent-4-c-deliberate-ambiguity/>

that's not always the case. Sometimes I am sincere, and sometimes I'm sorry that I got caught. So, perhaps looking at this parable from the viewpoint of the younger son can allow us to evaluate our own sincerity. // For example, we may talk about the need to address climate change, but we still order take out with all its waste, drive a car even if we're the only one inside, and take plane rides to far off places for fun. So too, we may verbalize our support for mental health services, the queer community, refugees, or free speech, but we don't show it with our advocacy, our financial support, or our vote. We, like that young son, may virtue signal with all the "right" words, but do we sincerely embody it? Something to ponder.

But what about the prodigal father? Yes, I said "prodigal father" or "wasteful father." For me, the father was probably the most wasteful person in the parable. After all, the father saw his younger son at a distance and quickly ran to his. In that act, he sent a signal to the community that his son was not to be cast out as cultural norms would have directed, but rather, the father's act showed that this young man was already reconciled to the community. The father gave him a fine robe and a ring of authority that very well might be sold again at the son's whim. And, the father invited the whole town to celebrate with him not knowing how the son might respond.

You see, this scene is where we discover the essence of the parable. Remember: it all started when the religious authorities were grumbling because Jesus was welcoming sinners and eating with them. Chronologically, the chapter then gives a story about the joy in finding a sheep that wandered off followed by a story about finding a misplaced coin. Then, we get today's story. The story we heard today is sometimes called

“the lost son” or “the lost sons (plural).” Who has heard it called that? Not many. But lost sons and a prodigal father is what this story is all about. It’s about rejoicing in reconciliation. It’s about the restoration of relationship. It’s about mercy upon mercy.

And it’s not only the reconciliation of the younger son with the father, but it’s also the reconciliation of the father with the older son. After all, that older son refused to reconcile with his brother, then he went on a tangent about how he has done everything right and he accuses his father of not being fair. The older son feels unjustly treated, and he feels that his envy, pride, anger, and hatred are all justified because of the law and the customs of the time. In fact, he was a lot like those religious leaders who are resentful. He was a lot like us when we believe that we do all the work and that no one ever helps us. It’s when we complain about wasteful social safe nets that don’t appear to help us, or that we claim that A.D.A. accessibility isn’t important because it doesn’t impact us, or when we believe that we do more for the church than anyone else. But, the problem with that is that when we are on the sidelines complaining and refusing to enter into the abundance that God has already provided, we are missing the party! We become too absorbed by what we do that we forget about God’s gifts, God’s grace, and God’s mercy.

And that is what is so radical about today’s gospel. You see, the father would have had every right to scream at the older son for his disrespect. But, yet again, like with the younger son, the father responds in defense of joy. For when the lost is found – no matter if it’s a sheep, a coin, or a family member – there is joy. Joy is discovered when we focus on being in relationship

instead of being right. Joy is found in sharing the abundance we have been given. Joy is God's vision for all of creation.

So, there it is. No matter if we call this story the prodigal son, the lost sons, or the prodigal father, we are reminded that amid our faults we have a God who is merciful. We have a God that invites us to a magnificent banquet of mercy. We have a God who encourages us to reflect that mercy that we have already received. In this Lenten journey and beyond, may we strive to be merciful as our God is merciful. Amen.