
PERSPECTIVE MATTERS

Let's rename this parable of JESUS.

- I mean, "The Prodigal Son" is a name that someone or some ones gave it somewhere along the line, and I'm not sure it really works all that well.
- After all, what does the word "prodigal" mean?
 - Well, it can mean "wasteful", but it can also mean "extravagant" or "generous" or "lavish".
 - So, while the younger son is extravagantly wasteful in his spending—therefore "The Prodigal Son"—isn't the father extravagantly generous in his love and forgiveness?
 - Perhaps "The Prodigal Father" or maybe "The Welcoming Father" would be better.
- But this story follows on the heels of the parables called "The Lost Coin" and "The Lost Sheep," so maybe call it "The Lost Son."
 - Though we might then find ourselves asking, "Which son?" because in his own way, the older son seems somewhat lost, too.
 - His relationships with his father and with his brother for that matter seem unclear.
 - So, possibly we should call this parable, "The Lost Sons" or "The Really Ticked-Off Brother" or "The Lost Sons and the Welcoming Father."

You see, titles give us perspective and perspective matters.

- Titles suggest what to hear.
- Once the title is named, you are already formulating thoughts about the story, and perhaps finding your place in the story.
 - And where you find yourself in the story says something about you.

Let's play a game for a moment.

- What is your favorite biblical story?
 - Now ask yourself, "Why is that my favorite? How does that story speak to me? Where do I find myself in the story?"

I love the story of Mephibosheth from II Samuel.

- Mephibosheth was the grandson of King Saul.
- After the death of Saul and Mephibosheth's father, Johnathan, Mephibosheth was carried away by his nursemaid, but dropped and both of his legs were broken.

As the new king, David should have searched out and eliminate all who might have a claim to the throne, and Mephibosheth was first in line.

- David, though, found Mephibosheth years later and invited him to eat at his table for the rest of his life as a member of David's family.

I like this story and find myself in it as one who is broken and deserving of death,

- but welcomed into the home of the KING and invited to sit at His table.

So, you see, perspective matters and it matters with this morning's parable as well.

Because of the title, "The Prodigal Son," we're used to focusing on the younger son.

- And I realize that many of us can identify with his taking off on his own, making some really bad choices, and then being overwhelmed by his father's grace.
 - It's a classic story of repentance and forgiveness.

But there are at least two perspectives in this story—two very different reactions to grace.

- One—when you're already down and out—is to hear this story with surprise and delight.
 - This wasteful, ungrateful son, welcomed home and restored to his previous place in the family.

The other, though, when you've been working hard and trying your best to be faithful, can result in resentment and a sense of "why bother?" or simply, "I've had enough."

- And I think those two reactions reflect the human tendency to be keep score.
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From the perspective of the younger son, he finally counts up the mistakes that he's made: his rejection of his father and his family; the poor life choices he's made; the squandering of the life he had been given.

- After tallying up value of his life, he finds very little and turns to his father who redeems him and restores him, even though he deserves nothing.

The older son, however, counts in a different way that reflects our life in the world and our need to keep track of things.

- The older son counts to make sure things add up, to measure and compare.
 - And the result of his counting is to see his world as being quantifiably unfair.
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Isn't that one of the cries that is often made today? That it's just not fair?

- Those who don't deserve are getting more than their fair share, and those of us who are more deserving are getting cheated.
- I think that's the source of a lot of unhappiness and anger in the world today.
 - We keep score in comparison to others and when we find ourselves coming up on the short end, we cry out, "Unfair!"

But didn't your mother tell you that life was unfair?

- Weren't you warned?
 - Probably, but that doesn't take that resentment away, does it?
 - So, we find ourselves trying to find ways to make things fair—at least for us and those to whom we compare ourselves.
 - We look for someone to fix it so that we get our fair share, and when it doesn't happen, because after all, life isn't fair, we find ourselves even more angry or sitting in a pool of self-pity.
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As important as counting is, though, sometimes it just isn't the best way to approach a situation.

- Especially in relationships.
 - Imagine counting every good thing someone did for you, and using that to judge how much that person loves you.
 - Or imagine keeping track of every unhelpful or hurtful thing people do to you and then demanding some kind of compensation for your suffering.
- But then, where would you find yourself, if those in relationship to you did the same toward you.
 - Where do you stand with your loved ones?
 - Do you owe them or do they own you?
 - How about with your children?
 - Have you loved and treated them equally, or is one child getting a better deal than another?

Life isn't fair, and keeping score doesn't work.

- So, Jesus tells this story and through this story, He tells us about the time when GOD ran. The father in this story does something that no good businessman ever would do. He ran.

- He ran to his lost child and welcomed him and restored him to his previous status in the household

- He makes a complete fool of himself by running down the road, so eager to see this son who had rejected father and family, and then left and squandered what was given him.

This is what GOD does with us when we go wandering off and lose our way and waste what GOD has given us.

- GOD stands and watches and waits, and when GOD sees us returning, GOD runs.

- GOD is so overjoyed when the lost is found, that GOD can't help but go, to welcome and to celebrate.

- And GOD restores us immediately to our previous status:

- a child and heir, entitled to our rightful portion of the FATHER'S inheritance.

But wait a minute. That isn't fair.

- In the story, the younger son has already gotten his inheritance and blown it.

- What is JESUS saying when HE tells us that the wasteful son is restored to his previous place in the family.

- He's going to get his inheritance again, and where is that inheritance going to come from?

- From the older son's portion, and that's not fair!

Yet what does the father do?

- He goes out to bring the older son to the party, too.

- More than that, he begs his son to come celebrate.

This is not the proper behavior for a father toward a child, but it is how GOD behaves toward us.

- GOD tells us not to worry about keeping score, because we are and have always been loved by GOD,

- and rather than being resentful about having to share what is ours,

- we need to see that is not really ours but GOD'S, to share however GOD chooses.

That can be hard when we think about worldly wealth and are keeping score.

- After all, GOD'S resources are unlimited, so in this story, it's fine that the younger son is restored.

But in the world, well, we work hard for what we have and shouldn't have to share with those who don't deserve—at least by our standards.

- Yet JESUS in the telling of this parable is also encouraging us to recognize that even in this world, what we have is given us by GOD,

- and we will find joy in celebrating when another is claimed and welcomed and loved—unconditionally.

It's a great story from the perspective of the younger son.

- It could be a terrible story from the perspective of the older son.

- What kind of story is it from the perspective of the father?

It might help us to answer that by finding ourselves in the crowd.

It is always worthwhile when JESUS tells a parable to take note of who is listening and then see where we might be in that audience.

We're told that there are really two groups present:

- the tax collectors and sinners, who would easily be able to identify themselves with the younger son,
- and the Pharisees and scribes, who would find themselves in the position of the older son.
 - The Pharisees and scribes were the ones who would see themselves—count themselves, if you will—as faithful and obedient to GOD,
 - doing the things that GOD wants and expects of them.
 - How dare JESUS suggest that they celebrate and rejoice with those underserving sinners who have no right to what the FATHER offers?
 - How could JESUS suggest that GOD would welcome these people and give them equal status with those who had dedicated their lives to being who they believed GOD wanted them to be?
 - Again, this is where perspective matters.

Rather than looking at this story from the perspective of the younger son or the older son, let's look at it for a moment from the perspective of the father.

- What must the father have felt when his younger son came and demanded his inheritance, in other words, wished his father to drop dead,
 - and, in essence, said that material wealth was more important than father and family?
 - Surely, the father's heart was broken.
 - Surely, he grieved for the loss of one of his sons.
- Isn't JESUS suggesting to those who judge the sinners of that day that they would do well to look at them with the eyes of a loving father?

More than that, even though the older son was faithful, working hard and obedient to the father, what did the father want most?

- A successful and profitable farm?
- One son of whom he could be proud?
 - Those of you who are parents know that what that father wanted more than anything else was his son and his family restored.

Jesus is telling those faithful Pharisees and scribes, that beyond just being obedient to GOD, they should be out looking for the lost ones—the ones the FATHER so greatly desires to have back in the family.

- Rather than keeping score and complaining about the unfairness of life, they should be searching high and low, and using whatever resources they have to find the ones who have lost their way,
 - because that is what will really bring joy to the FATHER.

And when they come, don't hold back.

- Throw a party. Bust the bank. Blow the roof off the place.
 - Celebrate because this child of GOD was dead, but has come back to life;
 - this one beloved of GOD was lost and now is found!

You see, it really is true. Perspective matters.