

## HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 11/25/2022

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

In the rabbinic tradition, scripture is considered to have “seventy facets,” like a carefully cut gem. When you read scripture, you keep turning it like a gem to examine and discover new faces for what the passage is saying. Like light refracting through the many surfaces of a precious gemstone, Bible study reveals new and deeper meanings to the story or verses which you are reading.

Take, for example, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. There are three characters in the story: the father, the older son, and the younger son. For many, when they read this parable of JESUS, they identify with the younger son who takes some money, goes and lives in a way that is counter to what his father would want, repents, returns to his father, and is forgiven. It is symbolic of the forgiveness we receive from GOD whenever we repent. But when you “turn the gem,” when you peel down the layers, you begin to discover much more. When this son asks for his share of the inheritance, he is really telling his father to “drop dead.” After all, that’s when you get your inheritance—when your parent dies. To wish such a thing is a huge sin against both family and tradition. He abandons his family, a tremendous transgression in that culture, and goes his own way. Another facet is that, to show how far from family and tradition he has gone, he goes to work feeding pigs. Pigs were one of the animals Jews were forbidden to eat or even touch. (Remember when JESUS cast a legion of demons into a herd of pigs? This was a fitting place for demons.) This young man has fallen to the depths of Jewish culture, so much so that he even wishes he could eat what the pigs have—to eat like a pig. It is at this point, he now desires to even just be in the presence of his father, an indication of how he has recognized the value of family. Again, this is often the character in whom we most find ourselves.

But consider also the older brother. He considers himself obedient and faithful. The good son. Yet, we know he has knowledge of his brother, his whereabouts and behaviors, because he says to his father that his brother has been wasting money with prostitutes. How does he know that? He must have been checking up on him. And he also knows that his father’s greatest hope is to have his younger son back so that the family might be restored. However, he has done nothing to get his brother to come home. Instead, he judges him and, in the process, rejects family as much as his brother has. If he truly wished to be the good son and faithful to his father, he would have brought his brother back. Turn the gemstone again, and we might find ourselves considering the actions of the older brother when his younger brother does return. He is angry and complaining about things not being fair. Rather than celebrating that his brother has come back, he resents that he has not gotten to have “fun” like his brother. Not even a dinner with his friends. At the end of the story, he is left with the decision of how he will respond to his father’s invitation to rejoice. Will he, or won’t he? And what about us when one who has lived in a way that falls short of our approval? Will we welcome them or shun them?

And then there’s the father. Of course, we see him as representing GOD, who always forgives no matter what HIS child’s sin is. Rarely would we look at ourselves from the perspective of the father. But we too will find ourselves in situations where we have the chance to forgive or not. Will we seek to be forgiving like the father, or will we condemn the actions of the one seeking grace?

There’s certainly more. There’s the inheritance the younger son has wasted. Yet, he is restored to his place in the family and, thereby, is intitled to an inheritance all over again. Which cuts into the older brother’s share. But which also shows how great is GOD’S wealth that we don’t even need to think

about that. Or that the younger son goes to a “distant country.” This also show how far he as gone from family and tradition. Or the servants in the father’s household who have “food to spare,” again illustrating the lavishness of GOD’S Kingdom. And the fact that when the father sees his lost son, he runs to him. And that the response to the return of one who is lost is to have a party. There’s just so much. All you have to do is to take some time and keep turning the gem.

In CHRIST'S love,  
Pastor Jeffrey