

The Prodigal Son

[Luke 15:1-3, 11-32](#)

I wonder, which son do you more closely resemble? The focus of today's scripture lesson is the younger son who goes away and squanders all his inheritance then returns to his father's house. But there is another son in the scene – the elder son who had remained faithful to his father. There are two sons in this story – the reckless one and the responsible one.

We have probably heard this parable many times before. As we begin today, I wanted to show you some art concerning this parable. Based on the scores of art available, clearly this is a popular parable. There is quite a mixture here so let's take a minute to look at these. [SLIDE SHOW] There is so much symbolism and so many interpretations of this parable that I think you could review it for some time and not hear the same

message twice. I want to leave this last image up as we talk about this parable.

What does 'prodigal' mean? We don't hear that word used in our regular discussions each day. Can you take a guess as to what it means? Many assume it means 'bad', so in this story we have the good, faithful elder son and the younger, 'bad' son. But the word prodigal actually means generous, abundant, wasteful. We can see these qualities in the younger son as he takes his money and spends it lavishly. Many from outside of the United States maintain this image of Americans in general, as lavish spenders of all that we have. The baby boomer generation has also been accused of this, having lived through times of prosperity and adhered to prosperity preaching that says you can have it all and you can have it now. I would venture to say we may all have some of these qualities. It can be easy to

fall into this idea. I think many have had a wake-up call through this recession – perhaps being frugal is not such a bad thing after all. I know churches in general that have had times of prosperity seem to always look back on those days with longing, but we are charged to minister to the needs of our community today, while we are here to serve.

Many see the father in the prodigal son story as God, who is literally running down the road to greet his child who has returned literally from the dead. Prior to this parable, Jesus shares 2 others in the gospel of Luke. The first is the parable of the lost sheep, where the shepherd has 100 sheep, but leaves the 99 to go in search of the one lost sheep and rejoices greatly when that sheep is found. The lost sheep is a repentant sinner and we are told heaven rejoices when one sinner turns to God. Then Jesus tells of a woman who had 10 coins but lost one and

goes in search of that one until she finds it. Then she too calls her friends together and rejoices over the one wayward coin that was found. I have mentioned a man named Mike Warnke before. Know that this man was for all intents and purposes a high priest in the satanic church. He rarely speaks of some of the horror that he was a part of during that time in his life, but he does mention that all the time he was running from God someone was praying for him. In his case it was a Catholic nun. At one point he says, ‘if you are running from God and you know there is someone praying for you, just give up! Especially if it’s your grandmother, give up!’ He became a wonderful witness for Jesus Christ as he describes himself as the prodigal son in the story.

So we see this repeated message of great joy in heaven when just one person turns his/her life over to Christ and follows

him. God our father is literally running down the road to greet us and treat us as family even though we probably don't deserve it. Maybe we have squandered our lives and finally realize that things are better when we turn back to God. We are dirty and tired and hungry and God provides for us in every way, not just with meager rations and worn out clothes, but with the fatted calf and the robes of royalty. We are children of God in spite of our past, and God rejoices when we find our way home.

But I don't think we can ignore the other son in this story. The eldest son is true and faithful to his father all his life. He never causes any trouble – never gives his father any reason to worry. He is steadfast in his work. He is the behind-the-scenes worker that is always there but many forget to recognize. What do we do about him? Let us look at the passage concerning the eldest son again in Luke 15 beginning with verse 25. [read Luke

15:25-30] Hmm. Sounds like trouble in paradise. The father is so elated that his son is alive again, he doesn't see that the eldest son is not as elated. The eldest son is truly jealous of his younger brother. It seems as if the eldest son would have been happy if his younger brother was dead and gone after all.

Maybe just once the eldest son craves the limelight – he wants to be recognized for his faithfulness to his father. So he stays outside and doesn't join in the celebration. The father must go out to him.

Are we like the eldest son at times? Do we get frustrated when we are faithful to God day in and day out and we don't seem to get any special recognition for it? Do you recall the parable of the workers in the vineyard? It's the one where the master goes to the marketplace seeking day laborers for his vineyard and goes at different times throughout the day, yet we

see the workers that only came for an hour receiving the same wage as those who toiled in the hot sun all day. We want the faithful workers to get more. We want them to be recognized for all their hard work. Like the eldest son, maybe all we want is a goat to share with our friends, when we see the fatted calf being used to celebrate the return of a sinner. Can we celebrate with others when we are not put into the limelight? Can we rejoice at the return of our brother?

There is another Bible story you may recall concerning the brothers Esau and Jacob. Esau was the eldest and was tricked out of his inheritance and his blessing by his younger brother Jacob. After Jacob received everything, he had to flee to another country because clearly he feared for his life – his brother Esau was going to kill him. Many of us would say Esau had every right to kill his brother. Years later, after Jacob

became extremely prosperous, he had to return and face his brother. So Jacob sent many gifts before him – gifts of cattle and sheep and treasures. He even sent wives and children ahead of him as gifts to his brother to sort of pave the way for his encounter with Esau. Reading from Genesis 33:1-4, “Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two maid-servants. [Jacob] put the maid-servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” What a story of forgiveness. Esau did not seek revenge on Jacob but welcomed him as his brother.

You will notice that Luke does not provide an end to the story. We are left with the celebration for the younger son going on inside the house, and the father trying to persuade his eldest son to come in and join them. The father is outside trying to appease his eldest son. If we assume that we are the prodigal son in the story, and the father is God, then who is the eldest son? Does he perhaps represent the religious leaders of the day – the Pharisees and Sadducees that are following the laws provided for them and keeping themselves as a separate people? It seems to make sense as Jesus repeatedly extends a hand to these leaders while reminding them that God's love is for everyone, even the lost sons of the world. Jesus came for the sinners and the saints so that we could all be included in the family of God. As our Methodist motto states, let us open our hearts, open our minds and open our doors to all who seek to be a part of the family of God and this body of Christ. Amen.