

**Sermon on Luke 15:11-32**  
**Delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Rockville, Maryland**  
**March 18, 2007**  
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In the name of God, Holy One, Holy Three, AMEN

In the adult forum over the last several weeks, we have been discussing faith formation, and particularly the role of stories as vehicles for communicating important truths about God, human beings, and the often-complicated relationships between them. Stories open up the way for faith to take root and grow within us, as individuals and as community.

If this morning's parable is any indication, Jesus was an accomplished storyteller. He knew that often, story conveys meaning in ways that propositional statements about God, or creeds cannot. Stories capture our imaginations, invite our wonder, catch us unaware, and lead us deeper into the life of God. Today's story, about a man who had two sons, is a prime example of how a seemingly simple story can convey complex and multi-layered truth. It is a story we know well—or do we?

If I were to ask you if this parable has a name, many of you would probably tell me: "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." Or if I were to catch you at coffee hour one day, when you hadn't just heard it read in church, and asked you "what is the Parable of the Prodigal Son?" you could probably tell me all the plot points of the story:

A son asks for his share of the inheritance his father will leave to him and his older brother when he dies. The father gives him the money, and the young man proceeds to squander his fortune. Soon he is destitute, longing to eat even the food of the pigs he is tending. When he is about as low as he can get, he remembers that even the servants in his former home have more than he has at present, and he devises a plan to return home, as a servant, in order to have food and shelter. As he is returning home, the father spies him, still a long way off, a speck on the horizon, and goes running down the road to meet him. The father does not even allow the returning son to get the words of the speech he has so carefully planned and rehearsed out of his mouth, before he embraces him, puts sandals on his feet, and rings on his fingers, dresses him in fine garments, and throws the welcome home party to end all welcome home parties. Meanwhile the older son, returning from work in the fields smells the roasting veal, and hears the strains of the party, already in full swing. The father comes running out to meet him, as well, bursting with the news of his brother's return. And the older son, who has stayed at home all along, dutifully tending to the affairs of his father's household, is so overcome with outrage and his sense of injustice, that he refuses to join the party.

Yes, we *know* this story. But, suppose I asked you, "What this story is about? What does it *mean*? *Who* is it about?" I would probably begin to get some different answers. And suppose I asked you a more important question, "why do we get this story right in the middle of Lent? What has this story to do with a 40 day journey towards Holy Week?"

What would you say then? Or what if I asked you my favorite Godly Play question, “I wonder, where are *you* in this story? What part of this story is about you?”

Perhaps some of you will take “The Prodigal Son” as a starting point, and find that the part of the younger son is about you. In that case, the parable may become a story about recognizing the error of our ways, the futility of trying to live without God, the need we all have to return home, our need for repentance. The focus of the story then becomes turning around—reorienting ourselves towards God. Told from this point of view, in the middle of our Lenten journey, this is the story of our lost wandering, our repentance, and God’s forgiveness. Those of us who have ever done something in our lives with disastrous consequences, and then changed course, recognize ourselves in the returning prodigal son. The sequence hymn we just sang gives voice to this truth of human nature: “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the home I love.” The story leads us to beg to be accepted back into the household of God. Certainly there is truth to be found here, the recognition of our wandering human souls.

But then there is the character of the older brother. The one who did not wander, but who stayed home, followed the rules and did everything that was expected of him. I am looking at the faces of people who faithfully attend worship—even in snowstorms—who support the church with pledge and special offerings, who serve on committees, make coffee, serve lunch to the whole community during Wednesdays in Lent, wash and iron fair linens, count Sunday offerings, teach Sunday School, carry the sacrament to the nursing home, work at the Bargain Box, or Loaves and Fishes, and pray faithfully for the people on our parish prayer list. It strikes me that most of us here are more like that older son—the one who never left home. And so I wonder: is the older son the part of the story that is about you? And what truth does he speak to us, knee deep in the purple of Lent? This son, for all he has worked his whole life to serve the father, is lost, too. Maybe even more so than the younger son. Perhaps he stands as a warning to us about self-righteousness and how often we pride ourselves on how well we are doing living by the rules. Maybe he shows us the error of assuming that we alone deserve God’s love and favor. Perhaps he allows us finally to give voice to a resentment we hardly dare to admit is in hearts—that in our labors for the kingdom we more often feel like slaves than God’s free children. Maybe he brings us up short with the realization that we often call those who are different from us “that son of yours” rather than “my brother.” In the older brother, we are brought face to face with our human nature to be self-righteous and hard hearted.

And there is also the father. I am fairly certain that this character is meant to represent God. But there are surely times, especially when the parent in me hears this parable, that the one in this story that I am called to be like is the loving and forgiving father. So, perhaps the father is the character in this story that could be about you. He shows us an ideal to emulate, to be sure, but that example brings us up short by exposing our human imperfection and our inability to forgive and to love as God loves.

I lived inside this parable all week, and in the end, I found myself wondering, what am I doing in the company of these characters? All they do is make me feel bad! Yes, I have

been the wayward younger son. I have been the resentful and hard-hearted older son. I have tried, and failed, to be the forgiving father. I confess to you that I find each of these characters to be an unappealing companion for my Lenten journey, reflecting as they do the unpleasant truth about my human nature. They leave me feeling somewhat hopeless.

On Ash Wednesday, I invited you all to become the broken-hearted people of God. It seems to me that if this story leads us to the truth of our contrary human nature, it does indeed break hearts. Yet, the purpose of having our hearts broken is not for them to remain broken, but to make room in our hearts for God—to open us up to the new possibilities to which God is always calling us. If we focus only on the sons in this story, our hearts may break, but it we may also become discouraged by our failings. If the focus is on the sons, we may wind up in hopelessness, rather than in openness and possibility.

Yes, the sons bring us face to face with human brokenness. But we already know about this first hand. We do not need this story to convince us that we fail in our relationships with one another and with God. We live in a world at war, a world of car bombs and land mines, of human slavery, of genocide; we live in a church where older and younger brothers refuse to be at banquet with each other and refuse even to use the name “brother” or “sister” of any who do not follow our rules, or who fail to repent, to our satisfaction, of their rule breaking.

Spending too long in the company of the two sons leads me—beating my breast—to that part of the prayer of humble access that wails: we are not worthy so much as to gather the crumbs from under your table. All right, I’m dust, already! I get it! End of story!

But you know what? That is *not* the end of the story. And I really *love* the prayer of humble access. But I don’t love it because of what it says about our waywardness and unworthiness; it is because of what it says about *God*. “You are the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy.” And suddenly it dawned on me—this prayer is not about us. It is about God, and about God’s undeserved and unfailing love.

And *then* it dawned on me that this parable—the one we often title the Parable of the Prodigal Son—is not about us, either. It might be better titled the Parable of the Loving and Forgiving Father, because this parable is about *God*. Godly Play has misled me this time—this story is *not* about me. Or it is only secondarily about me, and about our flawed human nature. Primarily, this is a story about the unfathomable abundance, excessiveness and relentlessness of God.

Furthermore, this is *not* the end of the story. God is not done yet. We really don’t know how the story is going to end. The scene fades to black before we find out if the older brother will relent and go in to join the party, or if the younger brother is going to stay home. We are left with a freeze frame of God’s eager waiting to gather the one on the outside into the banquet of thanksgiving with the one on the inside. And it is not really clear who is who.

God is not done yet. Not done the work of reconciliation, not done pouring love on the wandering, nor those who remain home. The image I am left with at the end of this parable is not the image of the younger, wayward son, nor the older, hard-hearted son. The image is of, the father, standing with arms flung wide in welcome and in entreaty.

Deep in the middle of Lent, we need to be reminded, not of our need, but of God's need. Not of our nature, but of God's nature as One who will continue to leave the party to seek those on the outside and bring them into relationship with the divine self and with one another until no one remains on the outside.

It is not only we who are prone to wander—God, too, is prone to wander until all are gathered into the divine party of welcome. I think, finally, that the parable seeks to open up for us—the wandering, seeking love and mercy of God. It is this image that the parable seeks to plant in my Lenten heart. It is the image of the father's arms flung open wide, the image of God's relentless love, that opens space within me to prepare for the miracle of Easter. Because only when I can believe and internalize God's seeking love and a mercy that is wide enough for both of these sons, wide enough for me, wide enough for you, is there the slightest possibility of my believing in an empty tomb, of brokenness made whole, or of life brought out of death.

AMEN