

Prodigal Love

The story I read to you and that we just saw interpreted in a short film is one of the most familiar parables of Jesus. Indeed, it is so familiar for some of us that it may have lost some of its original impact. This morning, I want to try to refresh our understanding of this story in some different ways. First, I want to consider the context of the story as Jesus tells it, both in the context of Luke's placement of the story and in the cultural context that would have existed for Jesus and his listeners. Second, I want to relate to you a couple of modern stories, stories of what could be considered parent/child relationships that came to me this week from friends. As we consider both Jesus' story and these modern tales, I hope that we'll be able to draw parallels in our own lives to our relationships with family and friends and the broader society and with God.

I began my reading this morning as the lectionary suggests, with verses 1-3 of chapter 15 before jumping to the beginning of the story of the prodigal son in verse 11. If you glance at the chapter in your Bible, you'll see that Jesus tells at least three stories in reaction to the Pharisees' criticism of his willingness to associate with sinners. The first two, the story of the lost sheep and the story of the lost coin, form the Gospel reading in the lectionary later this year. All three of these stories illustrate Jesus' understanding that God is not only willing to associate with sinners but that God actually seeks them out.

The set-up of this story begs the question, "Who is a sinner?" For the Pharisees, the answer was simple – anyone who broke one of the 613 mitzvot or commandments found in the Jewish Law and did not then perform the required sacrifices or purifying acts was a sinner and unclean. The tax collectors singled out for mention by Luke would have been considered especially unclean as they not only dealt with Gentiles, who were considered unclean because they were not Jews, and handled their money, which was considered unclean because it featured "graven images" in the portraits of kings and emperors, but also because they were collaborators with the enemies of Israel, the occupying government of the Roman Empire.

If these ultra-religious Hebrews had needed to discuss sin in more abstract terms, they may well have used the Greek word "ἁμαρτία." It means "to miss the mark" or "to fall short" and translates easily into words we use today when we consider humankind's separation from the way of God; words such as "fallenness" or "brokenness." These are useful ways of thinking about what the Scriptures call sin but as we think of this parable today and of the stories that I will tell you in a moment, I want us to think about another definition of sin as well. Gustavo Gutiérrez is a Peruvian scholar and Dominican priest who is often considered the founder of Liberation Theology. My appreciation for Fr. Gutiérrez and his approach to theology has deepened considerably in the last few years. In his thought, sin is defined as "the absence of fellowship and love in relationships among persons, the breach of friendship with God and with other persons, and, therefore, an interior, personal fracture." This definition strikes me as being very faithful to the perspective of Jesus, who sought to bring human beings back into loving relationship with their Loving Creator, the One he called Abba, the tenderest word for Father in the Aramaic language of the common people of First Century Israel.

It is the rupture and then the restoration of relationship that forms the plot of Jesus' famous little tale, or perhaps I should say rupture, restoration, rupture and reaching out. The first rupture, of course, takes place at the demand of the younger son that he receive his share of the inheritance.

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Those of us thousands of miles and years removed from the agrarian society of Jesus may not understand just how profound a rupture was created here. For this young man to have requested his inheritance in that time and place was tantamount to saying that he wished his father was dead. The fact that he then takes all he has and travels to a distant country means that he has turned his share into cash, selling off land that had likely been in the family for centuries, disrupting the function and economy of the farm and, since his father was owner of enough land to afford servants, probably disrupting the economy of the village as well. This self-centered young man has just given the proverbial bird to his family, his friends and all his neighbors, disrupting every relationship he has ever had.

Just as we may fail to understand the depth of that rupture of relationships, we may also minimize the gracious actions of the father upon the return of his wandering son. I especially liked the “visual gospel” we saw a few minutes ago because it shows the way in which the loving father searches and watches for the missing child. The father in the parable does not leave the farm to search for his son but he is certainly watching for his return. Jesus tells us that he saw the young man “while he was still far off... and was filled with compassion.” The father then did something completely unbecoming to the dignity of an aged and wealthy landowner – he hitched up his robes and ran to meet his boy, threw his arms around him and kissed him. His action would have scandalized the neighbors, who would have had very little good to say about this younger brother who had so insulted his father and disrupted their lives by selling land to an outsider. They may have expected the father to sell the boy into slavery to recoup some of the lost land. To take him on as a servant would probably have struck them as generous. For the young man to be reinstated in his old place in the household would have struck them as insane. Some commentators suggest that the lavish feast would have been thrown by the father as much to get the boy back in the neighbors’ good graces as to celebrate his return. The father goes far beyond what would have been expected of him in polite society to restore the relationship that his son had breached.

Some commentators have called into question the sincerity of the young man’s repentance. They maintain that it is physical hunger rather than a spiritual desire to change that motivates his return. They point to his rehearsed speech as proof that he was simply concocting a new scheme to reclaim his place of privilege in a well-to-do household. Frankly, I don’t think it matters much. The young man’s father, after all, doesn’t even let him get his rehearsed speech out. He is ready to receive his son out of pure love, regardless of the young man’s motivation. For the loving father, the pain of the ruptured relationship and the need for mercy outweighs the societal expectations for retributive justice.

This brings me to the first story I heard this week that connects with our parable. An old friend of mine was in town this week for a conference and we had coffee together one morning. We hadn’t been in very close touch for the last several years and so we spent some time bringing each other up to date in what I expected to be a somewhat cursory way. But our conversation quickly passed the line of polite chat between long-separated friends and the pain of my friend’s recent life welled out of him. He has three sons and in his case it is the elder son who is the prodigal. A handsome and charming young man, he has become a master manipulator, a truant, a drug dealer and a thief. With barely controlled grief, my friend told me of his repeated attempts to guide his son into turning around his life, attempts that have failed again and again, a

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process that has left his younger sons confused and vulnerable and turned a once happy family into a model of dysfunction. “I don’t know,” my friend said, “when my boy is going to hit bottom. Until he does, I know there’s nothing I can do for him.”

I wish I could tell you that I had profound words of pastoral wisdom for this old friend but I didn’t. I wish I could tell you that I have a profound word of applied theology for you this morning springing from this incident but I don’t. I will tell you this, though. As I looked into my friend’s pain-filled eyes and heard his voice break when he spoke of his son, I could only think of the father in this parable. In my mind’s eye, I saw as if for the first time a picture of that faithful father watching, watching, watching the road for his son’s return. I heard in the thickness of my friend’s voice the choked sob that must have escaped Jesus when he said “How often I have desired to gather you together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Or when he said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” I saw and I heard just a glimpse, diminished into human form, of the pain of God over all of us when we wander off into danger because of our own selfishness, our own “missing the mark,” breaching the friendship we should have with God and our fellows.

We generally call this story, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” using the usual definition of the word “prodigal” as “exceedingly or recklessly wasteful” after the way the young man blows his inheritance. In doing so, we put the emphasis on the young man and compare ourselves to him. Generally speaking, we are able to congratulate ourselves on escaping his level of rebellion and foolishness or perhaps we think sadly on how we have ourselves been prodigal and then gladly on how God has received us back, all of our missing the mark forgiven and broken relationships restored. But there is another prodigal in this story and that is the father. I’m using the word now in its less common definition: “extremely generous, lavish.” The patriarch of this little family practices prodigal love and I wonder what lessons we might draw from this story by focusing on him and not only how he represents God but also how he is a challenging model for our modern world.

I’m not talking specifically about the challenge that parents face in loving their children no matter what. All of us who are parents have dealt with that challenge in some way – hopefully in ways less extreme than in this story although I know that not all of us have escaped very painful episodes. Let me come to my point with another story, another conversation with another old friend that happened this week. This conversation began as a series of Facebook messages and, when we started to come to the heart of the matter, turned into a long phone call.

My friend has spent all of his professional life, about 30 years now, working for a ministry organization. The founder of the organization is nationally known as a speaker and author, bringing a message of God’s grace and love to thousands, if not millions, around the world. Those who have heard her speak, have read her books or have known her in the casual but intense way one comes to know a Bible teacher or workshop leader have been blessed indeed. She is funny, profound, gentle and generous. In setting up her ministry organization, she was guided in large part by the memory of her own beloved father, a small businessman who hit it big in Texas in the early part of the last century and who set up his company as the sort of benevolent patriarchy common at that time. My friend’s boss uses her own considerable resources to benefit her organization. Although her employees are relatively low paid, as is

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usual in their field, she often surprises them with bonuses, dinners and gifts, and many of them rent homes from her substantial real estate holdings at below-market cost. She bestows on them the love and gifts she might have given the children she never had. In return for her largesse, she asks of them absolute loyalty. Her every whim is to be followed as law. They are discouraged from attending conferences in their industry or seeking outside educational experiences as this might corrupt the purity of the vision of the organization. The Bible class she teaches at the company headquarters is mandatory, even when she says it isn't. She often pulls together special groups for little projects, telling them always that they are the heart of the ministry and that the others are merely timeservers. The groups, of course, do not always have the same members. Sometimes, my friend's boss is a benevolent despot. Sometimes, she is manipulative and cruel. She has coldly humiliated long-time and loyal employees in front of their peers, dismissed them from her employ and then just as publicly sobbed that they had abandoned her.

You might wonder why people work for this charming monster. As I said, she is often generous and kind. Her organization is one of a very few in our country that does the particular kind of ministry they do. Every year, she is deluged with letters from those who want to work for her company and particularly with her, famous as she is. She has her pick of the cream of the crop and usually hires the best young talent available. Those who stay more than a year or so are usually fully bought in to her vision, convincing themselves that the costs are worth the gains. Often, when long-term employees decide to leave, they find their resumes woefully thin, since she has allowed no outside training. They fear they cannot cope in the outside world. They are, like the inmates in "The Shawshank Redemption," institutionalized.

I tell this story because I think the story of the prodigal father has something to say to corporate America. In the agrarian society where Jesus' parable is set, family was not just where you ate breakfast and supper and slept and played. Family was also where you worked. The family patriarch was CEO of the family business and family businesses were the only businesses there were. I think when Jesus gave us the loving model of the prodigally loving father, he meant him as not only an illustration of our Loving God, not only as a model for us as parents but also as a model for those who run businesses now.

I'm not suggesting that businesses be run like families. Obviously my friend's boss has gone that route with rather disastrous consequences. But when I hear story after story of long-term employees laid off, or corporate branches being shut down, or wages being frozen or cut, all while the CEO or top corporate leadership takes obscene bonuses, I begin to wonder how things might be different if the CEO of Goldman Sachs was imbued with the spirit of the prodigal father rather than with what seems to be the spirit of the jealous elder brother?

I would be remiss if I did not mention this final character in the parable. The older brother, angry and offended that his runaway younger sibling has been welcomed back with open arms while he is apparently underappreciated, is by common consensus the stand-in for the Pharisees in Jesus' tale. He may be dutiful in his observance of his father's business directives, just as the Pharisees were dutiful in their observance of religious law, but he is as self-centered in his own way as the younger brother was in the height of his relationship-destroying sin. The older brother is unable to rejoice in his father's mercy because he thinks it isn't fair. And indeed it isn't. But as long as he or we or the titans of business who have wrecked the world economy are

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focused on getting what we think is our due, then we and they have missed the point of Good News. Jesus came to extend the love of God to those who feel they have lost it, that they don't deserve it, or that God simply doesn't care about them. Those who know themselves to be loved by God are called to share that love, not hoard it. The fate of the older brother's relationship with his father is left open in Jesus' story. It is an open invitation to us to reclaim our relationship with our Loving Father.

Let me return once more to the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez: sin is "the absence of fellowship and love in relationships among persons, the breach of friendship with God and with other persons, and, therefore, an interior, personal fracture." In this parable, Jesus reminds us that he came to repair those breaches of friendship with God, to restore the loving relationship between brothers and sisters and their Heavenly Father. As we contemplate the changes needed in our own lives in this Lenten season, let us remember that we, too, are called to bring others into loving relationship with our Loving Creator and with us and with each other. We cannot maintain the attitude of the elder brother if we are to live our lives for Jesus and live our lives for Jesus we must. Because he died for us, we can do no other. May God bless us as we seek to live for Christ. Amen.