

Prodigals, All
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Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
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If only the parent in this parable had been taught how to deal with triangulation maybe we wouldn't have this mess on our hands. Disgruntled siblings. A kind of anemic and implausible acting father who exhibits all kinds of inconsistencies and warped ideas of justice. We also have dutiful siblings and roguish ones, disdain for parental love couched in grievances and demands. Family dysfunction unfolding right before our eyes. Isn't this the type of stuff that is better left on the therapist's couch and not brought to church? Do we really need to have this all out into the open? And isn't this the type of story that has something to offend everyone? Resentment and grievances by otherwise privileged people. A child blowing the undeserved family inheritance in what Luke calls puritanically: 'dissolute living.' A parent who is not using the Ferber method but is constantly way more accommodating and loving than anyone should be. Commentator Robert Farrar Capon gives us a more detailed and accurate account of just what the vagueness of the younger son's dissolute living and what that might entail: 'we are free,' he reminds us, 'naturally, to supply any specific forms of riotousness that appeal to us: boys or booze, girls or drugs, or gambling casinos at \$10,000 a night.' Whatever the details, and however much the family fortune, the younger sibling blows it spectacular fashion.

The parent in this parable should not escape our ire either. After the child's inexplicable flame out, no questions are asked, no settlement agreements are put into place, no real justification or explanation is given. The parent is not exactly an advocate of the Ferber method here. The parent sees the child headed home, someone he thought he had lost forever, and the child he thought was a dead man walking is coming home, and so once again the parent humiliates himself by not standing dignified at the front steps waiting patiently for the prodigal to do some groveling, but while the son was still far off, running to him filled with compassion and welcoming him home.

As you might imagine, this is too much for the other sibling to bear, the one who has done what is right, dutifully, quietly, without much fanfare or demands. And when the fatted calf is put on the spit, it all comes to a head, and the family triangulation continues by not confronting his younger sibling directly, but instead confronting his father with his pent up grievances. For him this is clearly a justice issue and one that must have been eating at this first sibling all the way back to a divided inheritance that should have been all his in the first place. I'm telling you this parent's behavior undermines a lot of cultural norms...a younger sibling asks his parent for his portion of the inheritance while the parent was still living. I am no family law expert, but the cultural practice in the ancient near East was for the family estate to all go to the eldest child and more specifically, to

the eldest male sibling. This younger sibling has no claim or rights to this inheritance but gets a portion anyway. In Robert Capon's words, 'he tells his father to put his will into effect [now], to drop legally dead on the spot.' Indeed, the thread that runs through the behavior of the parent throughout this parable is the willingness to suffer indignity after indignity, to defy cultural norms, to risk forfeiting his very existence. Capon reminds us that the 'living' that the father divides up was not just stuff, but comes from the Greek word 'ton bion,' or life, being, and what the father gave away freely and what the son wasted away so frivolously was 'their whole existence, their very being, their lives.'¹

Many years ago in a seminary classroom, some students were tasked to re-name this parable. We were to read this story together and to question whether Luke or some ancient scripture collator knew what they were talking about when they named this parable the parable of the prodigal son. It's the father after all, who behaves erratically, who lets go of his dignity, who welcomes his scoundrel son back home, a son who has already prepared a speech renouncing his status as a child and requesting to just be treated like a hired hand. And it's not like the older brother loves his existence as his father's son either and sees himself not as his father's beloved child but in his own words, 'for all these years I have been working like a slave for you.' Both sons preferred another identity. So various groups of seminary students were organized and we put our heads together and tried to tap into our creative side to assess whether this parable was misnamed and if so, what a more appropriate title would be. Doing my best to recollect, here are some of the substitutionary titles: 'The Parable of the Father and His Children,' (not the most creative, but pretty descriptive), 'The Parable of the Father's Love,' (again, an obvious shift of emphasis from the prodigal to the gracious behavior of the parent but perhaps more creative and descriptive), 'The Parable of the Brooding Brother,' (I think this group just did not want to rename the parable exactly like the other two groups so they tried to be different but I am not sure they really believed that the parable was mostly about the older sibling), and perhaps one more alternate title was offered, 'The Parable of the Forgiving Father.' All good efforts, but in retrospect, I wonder if those ancient biblical collators were right after all. I wonder if the central figure of this whole story really is the prodigal son.

After all, Paul's letter to the Philippians reminds us that though Christ was in the form of God, 'he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave and being found in human form,' he humbled himself, even to the point of death. Could this parable be about a prodigal Savior who is not content to preserve his divine inheritance but who instead spends his inheritance and existence on people like us in the far country? Could the prodigal son leave his father's

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, & Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, 294.

house and come for people like us, people who don't have our act together, people who often squander what precious resources, time, and relations we have, people who prefer to stay in the dysfunction of dissolute living rather than enter the grounds of grace. Maybe this parable is about a prodigal son who comes for us in the far country and puts his very existence on the line for our sake in order to bring us back home to the extravagant grace of his parent. This story is not just about a man and his two sons, it is about us. This story is not just about a father who gives away his children's inheritance while he is still alive, this story is not just about a son who seemingly wastes his gift and existence away, this story is not just about a son who cannot stomach such wasteful living and prefers to stew in the juices of his own resentments. This story is about all these things, but it radiates beyond all these things. This story is also about us and includes us. This story is about a grace and a love that extends beyond this family dynamic and brings us into this realm of grace, not as second-class citizens or hired hands or less-thans in any way, but as the prodigal children of this erratic, undignified, and gracious deity, who refuses to see us, treat us, or welcome us as anything less than children of God. In Will Willimon's words, while we were still in the far country, 'while we were hostile, ungodly, chaotic, and rebellious, Christ died for us, rose for us, and appears to us. God didn't wait for us to get our act together.'²

As a teacher and storyteller, let's just say Jesus is not great at closure. Loose ends are not all tied up, there is no, 'and they all lived happily ever after' at the end of the story, though the story does end with a big feast and celebration. But not all is complete. We are left to wonder where we are in this story and what to do next. Will prodigals like us chafe at the lavishness of the grace that encounters us before we gave it permission and accepted it? Will we brood with the elder brother and long for a dispensation more to our liking? Will we remain in the far country too proud to admit that our Messiah looks more like a prodigal son than a hero on horseback? Will we refuse to attend the divine banquet because of all the riff-raff that got in with us? Unfortunately, Jesus does not give us answer to all those questions. He is frustratingly un-controlling, letting us linger as prodigals in the far country, or continue to stew on the outside of the party with the other brother, or letting us dabble with an existence that is something less than a child of God. And churches are no different. It is easier to function as a community of high achievers doing good in the world than it is to see ourselves as a community of prodigals. It is easier to function as a community that tailors our identity to people's felt needs, not asking us for much but just making us comfortable and guiltfree as middle-class Americans, than it is to live together with people whose zip code, skin color, or immigration status preclude them from the divine banquet. It is easier to stew in our own grievances, there's enough grace to spare for all of us. It is easier to run errands for the political establishment

² Will Willimon, *How Odd of God*, 114

and believe we are effecting change than living as a community that might transcend all our political straightjackets.

Apparently, Martin Luther's dying words were, 'we are beggars, this is true.' Perhaps we can tweak his deathbed proclamation just a bit to say, 'we are all prodigals, this is true.' To live our lives as if we have to earn all that we have been given keeps us from ever becoming the children of God that we are. All that is left for us is to join the prodigal Savior who refuses to leave us in the far country but who brings us again and again to the throne of grace where we are welcomed as children of God. All that is left for us is to live as a church that welcomes prodigals, rejoices in the astounding array of prodigals who continue to find their way into God's grace, and a church who works for the flourishing of all those prodigals who are not yet home but who are still on the way. And that, that would be a fitting end to the story.