

Most people, even people who are not Christian, call this story the parable of the Prodigal Son. But that's not what it is, is it? Listen to the beginning again: "There was a man who had *two* sons." This is a story about a dad who loved his sons and wanted them to love each other. This is a story about a family; one with some problems.

We can get preoccupied with the younger son's antics and turn this into a superficial story about a misbehaving fool who repents of his evil ways and gets forgiven. Those who remember the older son often portray him as a selfish, stubborn man who begrudges the love his father shows to his reckless younger son. Many are content to say that the father character in the parable is God.

Now, it's true that God is extravagantly wasteful—that's what the word "prodigal" means—extravagantly wasteful, that is, in pouring out an over-abundance of love and forgiveness and justice, even when we wander off and squander what God has given us. And it's also true that God loves those of us who become resentful of wanderers who come back into right relationship. That's just not *quite* what Jesus is talking about here. What Jesus is saying here may actually be even more profound.

God's grace really does surpass human understanding, but we'll slow down and try a deeper look. The problem that therapists might call the "presenting" problem is the younger son who tends to take center stage in this story. We meet him as he makes a very odd request. "Father," he says, "give me the share of the property that will belong to me." The father gives his son what he asked for without any questions.

Number two son then goes out to see the world where he squanders all of his inheritance, until one day he "came to himself." He decides to go back home where he'll be fed, housed and clothed again. He goes home, that is, to live off his brother's inheritance. On the way, we hear him working up a confession that may or may not have been sincere. Here's a telling little detail: Despite his claim to be unworthy, he begins his confession with, "*Father*, I have sinned against

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heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son ..." not "Master, I have sinned..." not "Lord," not even "Sir," but "Father," not questioning at all whether he is, in fact, still his father's son.

The good news for those of us who identify with this son is that Dad *doesn't care* whether or not the younger son is sincere. Instead, filled with compassion, Dad runs to the boy, puts his arms around him and kisses him. The boy begins his confession just as he rehearsed it. Dad hears none of it, but tells the servants to fetch a ring, sandals and the father's best robe. The boy who failed out in the world, found the wisdom to return home and to beg forgiveness from his father who gave it before he could even ask. The celebration is on. The lost boy is found.

That version is, indeed, the way most Christians interpret this parable. And it's a lovely story, as far as it goes, about our individual relationships with God—a story that promises that, no matter what we've wasted, when we finally go God to say we're sorry, we can be sure that God will throw a banquet in heaven for us. That version is also mostly an American Protestant story that sits well with people for whom reconciliation is not a sacramental ritual, which it is for Anglicans and other Catholics. We share with Protestants the sense that reconciliation is in God's hands, but as with other sacramental acts, reconciliation involves a process. And to understand the process, we need to look at the rest of the family.

Here's how we meet the older brother: Coming to the house from the field, he hears the celebration and learns from one of the slaves that his brother is home and that his father has killed the fatted calf—a calf that, by rights, would have been his. He becomes angry and refuses to go in. When his father comes to him, the older son protests. He has been obediently working his whole life, without so much as a kid goat to celebrate him. And yet, "When this son of yours," he complains—not "my brother," but "When *this son of yours* came back, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

Only now does the father realize that it was the older son who was truly lost to him. He has come to plead with his oldest son to join the celebration of the family becoming whole again, but the celebration is just a little premature. The older son has finally voiced his desire for his father to demonstrate love for him as he has just done for his younger brother. The father recognizes that he

must open his heart in vulnerability to the son he has lost through his own failure to demonstrate his affection.

And so the father says something to comfort the oldest son. The word that he uses is translated in our reading as, “Son,” but the original Greek word, *teknon*— a term of endearment—is better translated as “child.” This is the same word that Mary uses when she and Joseph finally find their own lost son in the temple: “Child,” Mary says to Jesus, “...your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” In saying, “Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours,” the father opens the way for reconciliation, making possible the restoration of family and emotional connections.

You see, this not a *repentance* story. Not yet. None of the three of them have expressed sorrow for hurting any other family member. This is not *yet* a *reconciliation* story. This is a *reunion* story that ends with the father’s invitation to the older brother to come back into relationship with his family. “We had to celebrate and rejoice,” the father says to his older son, “because this brother of yours,” not “my son,” but “*this brother of yours* was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

We leave the two of them standing outside the house in the field, listening to the celebration. If this were a film, it would just fade to black. Jesus does not tell us how it all turned out. That’s the difference between a parable and a fairy tale. In *this* parable, we experience not resolution, but only the opening of a moment that will work on us until the outcome of the story begins to arise in our own lives.

The father has offered the younger son an *opportunity* for reconciliation, but at some point the son will need to actually repent and prove his own responsibility if reconciliation and true forgiveness are ever going to come about. The father has offered the older son an *opportunity* to recognize his own “lost-ness” and “found-ness,” and in the first stages of true forgiveness, the older son has named the breach he has felt for years and the father has acknowledged that pain. And the sons have given the father an *opportunity* to reconcile with them—to make his family whole—by seeking forgiveness from the older son who never felt the father’s love and to return to right relationship with the son that he over-indulged rather than setting loving boundaries.

Reconciliation is only one form of forgiveness and not always the most appropriate goal. If this family chooses to pursue genuine reconciliation, all three will have to work past any residual ambivalence toward forgiveness; all three will have to fight the powerful pull to return to entitlement or resentment or disengagement. Only then can they begin to look forward to growing on beyond their *individual* healing and heal the *family* by learning to genuinely forgive each other—to receive what God creates anew.

“All this,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” Repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation *are* truly gifts of grace from God, but they are also processes. Through our choices and actions, the Holy Spirit can create new peace, joy and hope; can enhance our capacity to give and receive love and gratitude.

So if you seek reconciliation, take this parable to heart. Start at the beginning and walk through the doors that open. Recognize that the one you have lost may be in your own household. *Begin* by going to them.

If you are the one who needs to repent and be forgiven, *begin* by accepting your responsibility for causing others pain. If you find yourself resentful, waiting for apologies or waiting until you can work up the energy to forgive, *begin* by working out exactly how you feel about what happened. Be able to articulate what about the situation is not alright.

Beginning this holy process prayerfully invites God into the next steps with you to guide the rest of the process. If repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation come, they are gifts of grace. All we can do is open ourselves to a second chance for wholeness and joy. To come to ourselves. To come home.