

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So Jesus told them this parable: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

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We are now halfway through Lent, a season of introspection; of self-examination. Lent is a gift of holy time to step away from our wishful thinking and our complaints long enough to reconnect to what matters most; to reacquaint ourselves with our principles and our purpose.

And our God.

Lent is a rare opportunity to step away from habitual patterns of blame and to use that time in the more uncomfortable scrutiny of our own personal responsibility; looking into the ways that we unintentionally undermine our own best interests and convictions. With God's help and without sliding into shame, we can turn the lights on our own self-defeating behaviors: our

procrastination or defensiveness, the ways that we alienate or control others, our tendencies toward suspiciousness, hostility or inaction. During Lent, we can investigate these and any other of those motivations that prefer to lurk in the shadows away from our prying eyes.

And so why, here at the turning point of this season of introspection, why do you suppose we hear this story of a man who has two sons?

We know this story well. And yet, it also seems true of our relationship with scripture that the more familiar a story becomes – the more central the story is to our life and faith – the more barnacles it collects.

On Epiphany, for instance, most Christians will tell you that three wise men came to the Holy Family. That's tradition. Maybe not wrong, but not scripture. Maybe there were three or maybe a dozen with three kinds of gifts.

On Christmas, even our children are sure that Jesus was born the night Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem. Yet, Matthew's Gospel tells us only that Jesus was born "in the days when Herod was King" and Luke's Gospel says that while the family was in Bethlehem, "it came about that the days (plural) of her bearing reached their term."

And this parable, Luke's story of the man with two sons, may be in even greater need of a good barnacle scraping. That done, we may ready to hear with fresh ears what Jesus, a devout Jew, said to our ancestors in the faith.

The first layer of crust involves our tendency to label. We call this story "the parable of the prodigal son." The word "prodigal" indicates reckless, wasteful extravagance. And it never appears in the story. St. Jerome wrote about the "prudent and the prodigal sons" in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Coptic Christians name it "The Lost Son" and Lebanese Christians refer to "The Clever Son."

Each title suggests the message that the interpreters want us to hear and blurs other potential insights. Notice how our expectations and curiosity change when we rename the story "The Son Who Stayed Home" or "The Parable of the Absent Mother" or "The Laissez Faire Father." We could follow the example of the other two parables Jesus told just before this one as an intended set of three and call it "The Father Who Lost His Sons."

Instead, let's scrape away any title and see what starts to emerge.

The next layer to scrub clean is our post-modern Western European perspective. We see allegories everywhere. We see the father in the story as a representative of God, and then we try to work out which of the sons we are or which son represents other people.

Dealing with this layer of encrustation requires a great deal of care. Practiced with skillful caution, probing scripture allegorically can lead to life-

affirming understanding. Without a gentle touch, the comparison of one thing to another can *close down* the meaning of a parable instead of opening or deepening it. Worse yet, simple similarities can degenerate into dangerous stereotypes.

What we believe about scripture heavily influences what we believe about God. Our perspectives filter what we hear and learn about God and God's relationship with creation; with people different than we are. Opening ourselves to something new begins with remembering that some people see life like we do and other folks see life very differently.

If we aren't aware that we have perspectives and make assumptions, then our perspectives have us and our assumptions make us.

To see the father in Luke's story as an image of God who yearns for reconciliation is fine, as long as we remember that this is also a Jewish image of God. To see the younger son as an image of gentile Christians is far riskier. And we slip entirely off the point when we claim that the older son represents the Jewish resentment of God's gathering people beyond the Israelites.

And yet, up until his recent death about a decade ago, there was a prominent Swiss Reform theologian who presented this parable as a story about the kindness of God told as a rebuke to the Jews who nailed Jesus to the cross (which, of course, they did *not* do); a teaching intended to replace what he called the "superstitious Jewish belief in a God of wrath" (a totally unfair parody of Jewish theology).

Countless theologians have insisted that the older son represented Jews who only obey God out of a legalistic, hide-bound sense of duty rather than out of love. There are even a handful – a *tiny* handful – of Christians who claim that the unforgiving brother refers to Simon Wiesenthal, the Jewish American Nazi hunter, as though Nazi hunters should just let bygones be bygones.

All these interpretations are based on the unreliable assumption that this parable is about who is *in* and who is *out*. And so, they miss what our Jewish story-teller intends to convey; the same Jesus who, on Good Friday, will stretch out "his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross" so that all people, *all creation*, might "come within the reach of his saving embrace."

When life doesn't go as we think it should and we don't notice that we hold assumptions, our assumptions can compel us to start pointing fingers. We react to what we can't stand. And the more we give in to that impulse, the more our assumptions separate us from naming and reclaiming what we

stand for. We start assigning blame and lose sight of our own self-defeating, occasionally fearful or arrogant behaviors.

There is another approach – a Lenten approach – that leads to far less mischief. Lent allows us – no, Lent *challenges* us – to look to ourselves first.

This is an entire season for re-examining ourselves; our behaviors and attitudes, from the noble to the nasty. This is the holy season of self-scrutiny when we practice facing the reality of habits that alienate us from our best selves and from those we claim to care for; a time for taking fearless inventory of behavioral patterns that separate us from God and the church, with all her flaws; probing and updating assumptions that isolate us from God's other children who don't see life exactly the way we do.

Rather than abandoning our assumptions, the challenge of Lent is to, first, simply become aware of them and then to set aside our inadvertent reliance on them. Only then can we refocus our trust where it is most fruitful. Once we wake up to a fuller awareness of our limited perspectives, we can turn toward the Loving Presence watching over us; watching *with* us. Opening ourselves for even just a season is long enough for God to expand our understanding of life and our sense of possibilities within it, and to make us more whole.

Each and every one of us has within us the child who wastes gifts and rare opportunities, only to find ourselves hoping to return again and again. Each of us has within us the ever-hopeful adult scanning the horizon for unlikely reunions, and then running to embrace them when they show up against all odds. At times, we are the revelers in some far-away place with customs we don't share. We are servants in the wrong households. We are the responsible one who chooses not to discipline. We are the resentful child, angry, uncomprehending and exasperated.

We are all these by turns and yet...

"There is a movement," Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, "a movement, not easily discernable, at the heart of things to reverse the awful centrifugal force of alienation, brokenness, division, hostility and disharmony. God has set in motion a...process moving toward the center, toward unity, harmony, goodness, peace and justice, a process that removes barriers."

Luke's parable brings all these together – with no resolution. There is only reunion, no reconciliation. Not yet. The outcome is left to the imagination. Because the way it plays out will differ in each one of us and in different communities with different results. We can experience it if we are open to it.

We can choose to hear this parable in search of insiders and outsiders. Or we can assume that Christ holds all people, all creation, in one cosmic embrace. We can catch a taste, a scent, of that unity within ourselves and act like we trust that, as Archbishop Tutu says, “there are no aliens...all belong in the one family, God’s family, the human family...instead of separation and division, all distinctions make for a rich diversity to be celebrated for the sake of the unity that underlies them. We are different so that we can know our need of one another, for no one is ultimately self-sufficient.”

I invite you to listen to Luke’s story with fresh ears: “There was a man who had two sons...” And ask yourself how this story will resolve in you and for the people around you.

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