



I was really, really tempted to preach on something other than the Gospel this morning. After all, this is such a familiar story that it can be hard to see something new in it. Prodigal Son. Big yawn. Perhaps being wary of the big yawn is what makes a review of this story important. What we are tempted to dismiss as too familiar may, in fact, have new insights for us.

One of the daily Lenten devotionals reminded us that **every** meaningful relationship results in disappointment at some point or another; someone always messes up. It's just part of the human condition.<sup>1</sup> And maybe this is part of what we need to remember at this midway point of Lent. And maybe this is part of what you and I need to remember at the 3 month mark of my time with you. Sometime- maybe yesterday or today or tomorrow or next month or next year- sometime, you and I are going to disappoint each other. A hope or a dream that we had for our ministry together is going to hit some rough patches. Our question then is whether we stay the course, work through those disappointments or we walk away. And if we choose to walk away, my hope is that reflection has been done about why that is the better choice. And if we choose to stay, that we understand that Jesus has called us to love one another- not just like one another. And loving one another means we work through those rough patches.

The parable we read and consider today is about- *in part*- what happens when we face those rough patches when we disappoint each other. What the parable in Luke means to us – depends in part on what title we give it.

Is this “The Prodigal Son” with our focus on the son who takes his inheritance, leaves town, squanders it and later returns once he is hungry? Is this “The Father with two sons” with our focus on the hierarchical nature of father and sons? Or is this “The two brothers” with a focus on the relationship among the two brothers? Or, maybe, something else altogether.

The label we put on things – including readings from scripture – impacts the way we understand the readings and the lessons we take from them. One reason scripture remains alive to us today is that it often does not have one simple meaning. This parable is a prime example of Jesus speaking to us regardless of where we are in our faith journey. Where we are in our understanding of God changes over our lifetime. Scripture is, if we let it, relevant each and every day of our life.

Some commentators have called this parable the entire gospel in miniature. It contains the message of Jesus in a few short lines. How you and I understand Jesus determines how we live

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.d365.org/journeytothecross/> (March 8, 2013)

our life. And how we understand this parable tells us a lot about how we understand Jesus. It calls us to love and accept each of the three main characters: Father, younger son and older son.

If we call this reading “The Prodigal Son” we focus on the actions – good and not so good – of the younger son. What the younger son did – asking his father to give him his inheritance while the father was still alive – is shocking, then and now.

Just imagine going to your own father and asking him to give you what you will inherit upon your father’s death. Telling your father, in effect, that he has no value to you except for money. Telling your father that his value to you is only if he is dead. The hurt had to be tremendous.

But the father, contrary to custom, gives the younger son the portion that would be his upon the father’s death. Why did he do that? I don’t know. Perhaps because the father wanted peace in the household and this was one way to get it. Perhaps because the father foresaw what would happen and counted the return of the son at some point in the future as worth the cost. Perhaps because the father had always given the younger son what the younger son asked for and this was no different.

If we call this parable “The Father with two sons” we focus on the hierarchical nature of society in that time, and in many places still today. Each son relates to the Father and not to each other. The Father is the centerpiece of the story and it appears that the sons are treated differently. The younger son is favored over the older son – a common theme in scripture. Think about Cain and Abel. The younger son’s offering is accepted by the Father while the older son’s offering is deemed of no value by the Father. Remember Jacob and Esau. The younger son tricks the older into giving away his heritage in exchange for a meal. And then there is Joseph and his older brothers. Joseph is resented for his brightly colored coat and sold into slavery. In each of these examples, the younger son is the favored one.

On the other hand, if we call this parable “the two brothers” it may hit closer to home. How many of us have a sibling – either older or younger – and remember sibling rivalries? Maybe you were the studious one and did everything your parents asked of you. Your brother or sister was the athletic one – gaining fame for playing well on the ball field. Your brother or sister was the social one who had lots of friends while you sat on the sidelines. Maybe your brother or sister was the class clown who got lots of attention while your accomplishments seemed to fade into nothingness –no one noticed.

Sibling rivalry can breed resentment and bitterness. The elder son in this parable seems to be lost just as much as the younger son.

The younger son, through living away from his family, through hunger and through working at a job which his faith and his community would have scorned, finally “comes to himself.”

Something, we are not told what, caused that young man to take a good, hard look at himself and his situation, and turn his face towards home. Not expecting a welcome as a son – that would be too much given how he acted towards his father and his family – but recognizing that being a hired hand in his father’s household would be better than what he had. And so the younger son

takes off, repeating to himself: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired hands.”

Luke tells us “that while he was far off” the father recognized his son and ran to greet him. For how many years had the father waited for his son “to come to himself.” However long it was, the father patiently waited until that day when the son, in fact, returned.

The son didn’t even get a chance to repeat his whole speech – just the first part: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Before the son can ask for a place in his father’s household as a hired hand, the father has already called for a celebration. The younger son is restored in his father’s household – not as a hired hand but as the son who was lost and is now found.

Just like the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to go looking for the one – and when the one is found, the shepherd calls all to rejoice. Just like the woman who loses one coin, sweeps her whole house until she finds it – and then calls the community to celebrate. The younger son – the one who was lost and is now found- is cause for celebration.

But if we call this parable the story of two brothers, what about the elder brother? He learns of the return and the celebration, and in his resentment and his bitterness, he turns aside. His father runs after him, as well, to urge him to join the party.

Do you hear yourself in the elder brother’s words? “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.”

How interesting that the elder brother saw his work for his father as tantamount to being a slave. There is no indication that the father mistreated the elder brother. How interesting that, having seen his father give his younger brother the portion that would have been his upon his father’s death, the elder brother never thought to ask for even so much as a goat to celebrate with his friends.

And how sad that father and son, though working side-by-side, seem to have been unable to communicate with each other.

Why did the elder brother stay working for his father? We don’t know. It could be that he felt he had to – maybe that is why he characterized his time as being a slave to his father. It’s clear in the elder’s brother’s response that there is bitterness and resentment at having been “the good son” and feeling left out.

Is the father’s statement that all he has is the elder son’s sufficient? Will the elder son join the party? Jesus doesn’t tell us. And maybe that is part of the point of this parable. You and I are probably too often the elder son.

We do what is right. We stay the course even when we see others – siblings or not – garner the limelight, waste their inheritance or otherwise flout society’s conventions. Many of us when we

hear about someone convicted and in prison for a serious crime subsequently experiences a religious conversion think “I wonder if it’s real.”

It can be hard to be loved by the Father – God offers mercy and too often we want justice- when justice means that we get our way. The Father – God – is always speaking to us – reaching out like the Father in this parable to welcome home the wayward one. And not to leave it there but to reach out as well to the ones who stayed the course, who lived the good life – but still suffer from resentment and bitterness because the world does not always appreciate and honor their sacrifice.

God constantly invites us to the feast. It is up to us to accept the invitation. If we are stuck in our need for value based on merit, we will go hungry. If we can find ways to set aside our bitterness, resentment and sibling rivalry, the food is plentiful and fills all our needs.

Come in out of the cold. Sit down and eat. Reaching out to God for forgiveness is nothing to fear. God is already reaching out to you with nothing but love.<sup>2</sup> *Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.*