

The Father Who Had Two Sons/Lk. 15:1-32

There are gospel lessons that, once done, leave us to say: “What did that mean?” And there are gospel lessons, like today, where I am tempted to simply try to read it well, and sit down. What more can be added to what many see as the cornerstone of the parables of Jesus? The masterpiece, if you will, of the parables. In this parable, Jesus kneads into the mix: God’s forgiveness (given before it is even asked for); God’s love (for those deserving and undeserving); the abundance of grace; the recklessness of God’s love.

It’s all there. You just heard it in the gospel lesson. And I really feel like I can just go sit over there and take a seat. Jesus has already preached the sermon to you in the words we just heard. But the Bishop came by last week and he told me we preachers must preach. Alas!

We spent time on this parable at the Wednesday Bible Study. One thing that became clear was how truly rotten the younger son was as the story unfolds. In those days (like these days) an inheritance was given at death. And, back then, most wealth was tied up in land, something to be passed down from generation to generation. The young son here did two rotten things (at least). First, he said to his dad: “Let’s pretend you’re already dead! Give me what I deserve, now!” Ouch.

Then, when dad did just that, he turned it all into cash. Sold the land (in effect stealing it from those future generations who would never inherit it...) and off he went.....

It’s useful to sit with the enormity of this kid’s self-centeredness. The hole he ripped in the fabric of this family was huge. All of which makes the father’s response on his return all the more jaw dropping.

Dignified men in ancient Israel did not run. Dad ran. Dignified men in ancient Israel never showed their legs. Dad hiked up his robe in order to run. Rather than wait and see if the kid learned his lesson, the dad ignored the boy’s speech, gave him the robe of an honored guest, gave him the family ring used to sign contracts, and replaced his bare feet of

a slave with the shoes of a master. Meat was a rare treat in those days, and meat is what dad ordered up for this returning son.

As you heard, older brother, who was busting his okole in the fields, was not amused by this reunion. And dad is back to work again. Reminding him, cajoling him, pleading with him to see what is happening with new eyes.

The story ends here. What will the older brother do?

If you look at the gospel handout today, you will see it starts with Luke 15:1-3 and then jumps to verses 11-32. It starts by telling us who the audience was. The Pharisees. The good folks. The ones who dedicated their lives to God; to the Law; to doing the right thing. And they were quite perturbed that Jesus was hanging out with those who, to put it politely, were of “doubtful reputation.” The gap, the part we skipped today, were two parables that are very familiar to us all. The first begins: “Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep, and lost one?”

The second begins: “Or imagine a woman who has ten coins and loses one.”

One hundred sheep. Ten coins. Now, two brothers.

Lost children require a different response than lost coins or lost sheep. Sheep and coins can be hunted down, searched out; diligence and effort can bring about the desired result. But when it comes to lost children, one can, in most cases, only wait. As the dad did in the parable. Not knowing, not controlling, only hoping, yet resigned that the boy may indeed be already dead. Many of us have endured this with our children.

I'll tell you one thing about Jesus. He doesn't theorize. He doesn't spew out airy, philosophical sayings. Nothing pithy here. He talks about life. In all its fearfulness, in all its uncertainty, in all of its blood, sweat and tears. He doesn't hold back. Yet, by bringing us face to face with life as it is; he also assured us that in the heat of life, life as it is; God is

standing, God is present, God is. And not only present, not only standing, but with arms open, running to greet us.

It's ironic that in America, starting with the Puritans, the idea of God has been so wrapped up with the idea of a punishing God, a vengeful God, a God never satisfied with we his children. That image is hard to reconcile with the dad in today's parable. That old message keeps a lot of people out of church, away from the gospel, terrified and afraid. Many of those same folks are gravitating to what are called mega churches.

You've probably heard of them. Robert Schuler's Crystal Cathedral. Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church. Rick Warren's Saddleback Church. These places usually exist in auditoriums. Usually, there is no cross, no stained glass depicting the stories of the gospel. No symbolism of the mystery of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Instead they preach a "gospel of prosperity", a gospel of "positive thinking", "God wants you to be rich!" or "Your attitude determines the life you will lead." It is a theology of expectation, but expectation defined as "Ask and God will deliver all the stuff you want." The runaway best seller, *The Secret*, is based on this curious theology. Visualize what you want and the Universe (i.e. God), which is a vast mail order warehouse just waiting to fulfill your desires, will deliver.

One of those prosperity ministers wrote that when the \$200 she needed for a plane ticket failed to materialize, she "sat down with God and gave God a severe talking to. 'I said', 'Now, look here God! As far as I know, I've done every single thing I know to do in order to manifest this trip to Mexico City. I've kept my part of the bargain! So now I'm going to go right down to that travel agent and when I get there, that money had better be there!"

That's a quote from the book "The Four Spiritual Laws of Prosperity: A Simple Guide to Unlimited Abundance."

As the writer of Ecclesiastes reflected: "There is nothing new under the sun."

This prosperity gospel, with its emphasis on positive thinking and bargaining and our own efforts is very like the older brother in today's lesson. He, like the lady demanding airfare to Mexico, has a relationship with God that is based on obligation, on duties and on entitlement. Their world is divided quite neatly into the deserving and the undeserving.

The younger brother was plainly in the camp of the undeserving. The older brother, squarely in the camp of the deserving. And here comes Jesus. And Jesus explodes that world. Jesus exposes the reality that both camps need God's mercy.

The undeserving for their selfishness, among other things, the deserving for their sense of entitlement, among other things.

God's mercy. God's grace. So freely given. So patiently offered to deserving and undeserving.

And Jesus explodes something else as well: that in order to be in the Kingdom of God, we must first leave this life. It is not so. The Kingdom of God is here in this very room. We can touch it, feel it, and live it right now, today and tomorrow. God is the God of the living ... and that includes you and I.

We simply need to open our eyes, clean out our ears, and there it stands: God's Kingdom, breaking into our world. Wherever the lost are found, there is the Kingdom of God. Wherever the hungry are fed, the houseless housed, the sick visited, the prisoner comforted, there is the Kingdom of God!

Come and join the party (!), the father says, to each and every one of us. Come today! Come and enjoy!

One hundred sheep. Ten coins. Two brothers. And this question: Will the remaining brother, the deserving one, will he come in and join the party?

Amen+