

***"The Parable of?"***

This Gospel reading is not only one of the longer Gospel readings, but it is a very powerful Gospel reading. I think you might agree that we remember and recognize that there is no such thing as perfect children. On the other hand you might agree that there are no perfect parents. Today's Holy Gospel reading from Luke hits these statements right on the head. Jesus gives us a parable that could have several different titles – depending on the point of view that you relate to. There are three major players in this parable – the young man – the younger son, who basically told his father that he was dead to him and demanded his inheritance now. The father – who gave his son what he asked for – holding out hope that he would one day return – but in the meantime he was gone. The third person is the other son – the older one, who remained with the father, doing everything that was needed of him – faithfully serving his father.

Jesus explains: *"The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living."* (Luke 15:12-13) We don't know why he wanted the money or why he wanted to leave – but he did, in spite of the shame and heartache that it brought to his father, his family, and ultimately to himself. By his taking the money – he was in essence declaring his father dead – taking the property and money for himself, which he wasted on partying. He blew it all and was left with nothing! The Gospel tells us he went to another country. The country where he was living was struck with a severe famine – leaving him penniless, destitute; let's face it - he was not just in want – he was desperately in need.

While seeking pleasure and fortune, this young son ended up being far away from home. Any country that he would live in could not have been Israel – would most certainly be non-Jewish – or Gentile. We know that the people couldn't be Jews because had nothing to do with pigs, with swine. He was a poor, outcast foreigner who was so far from his father it was as if they were on opposite poles of the earth. He was so desperate that even what the pigs were eating looked appetizing to him. He must have been getting next to nothing in salary – having to eat with the pigs! How low can you go!

Having hit rock bottom, he thought to himself, "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." (Luke 15:18) He realized that his sin cost him more than he possible ever could have imagined. The Gospel tells us that he came to his senses, realizing his sin and that he longed to be made *"as a servant,"* willing to take even the lowest place and do the nastiest work, if necessary. It was as if he once said, "any place rather than home," but now was saying – "there's no place like home!"

He set out to return to his father – not expecting anything other than an opportunity to be a servant – which would be better than where he was now.

Let's consider the father. His youngest son had given him the highest insult that a son could give a father. He as much as told his father that he was as good as dead to him, and he wanted his inheritance now. It was like the JG Wentworth commercial – “it's my money and I want it now!” How utterly sad. Relationships meant nothing to him. What was important to him was money. The father gave him what he asked for.

We now fast forward to the younger son coming home with his tail between his legs – seeking some kind of mercy. He would throw himself at the mercy of the father. He made his way toward the father's house – and fortunately for him - his father didn't see it that way! He didn't even have to complete the trip because when the father saw his son coming – he RAN to meet and greet him.

Jesus tells us that happened next in today's Gospel: (Luke 15:20-24) *“So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. 'But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.”*

I want to suggest to you that it was not dignifying for an elderly Jewish man to run, but his love for his son took priority over dignity. Thinking of the normal clothing of the day, the father would have had to pull up his “skirt” to run. Can you just picture a grown man trying to run-in floor-length robes?

In a brief moment – this young man was restored! What happened next is remarkable.

- The best robe in the house that belonged to the father himself – would be signifying the return of his place of honor.
- The ring which could have been a family signet ring - became a symbol of reinstatement to son-ship in his father's household.
- Slaves did not normally wear sandals, but they carried and tied a master's sandals. With this the father was saying, “No, I won't receive you back as a servant. I'll receive you only as my son.”

And then the third guy, the older son, the rightful heir to the estate of the father. We see here is the harsh reaction to his prodigal brother's return and to the lavish party his joyful father throws. The father who had been wronged forgave. But this eldest son was unforgiving, filled with contempt and pride. His resentment is harsh. Jesus continued His parable saying, *"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never*

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*disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "* (Luke 15:28-32)

I want to suggest to you that we can see the character of Almighty God in the father of these two young men. In this parable, Jesus shows us: the power of forgiveness, the danger of self-righteousness – of judging others, and the richness and humility that comes with repentance. It is not so hard to say I am sorry – and mean it. In these two men we have a look at possible directions that humanity can take – ultimately one with sin and repentance and the other headstrong and unforgiving.

Remember at the start of today's message I said that this parable, depending on your point of view, could have one of several different titles. Each one here today comes in with different life experiences, and different viewpoints, different political viewpoints, and hopefully all the same religious viewpoints. I want to suggest to you that there is no right or wrong answer to this question – and I will give you several suggestions. You might have a better one. Could it be called:

- Parable of the lost son?
- Parable of the jealous older brother?
- Parable of the Prodigal Son?
- Or the Parable of the Loving and Merciful Father?

You decide.