A Tale of Two Sons

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 15:11-32

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Author Charles Dickens knows a thing or two about what makes a great story. He once said the parable of the Prodigal Son was the greatest short story ever written. He modeled his classic novel *Great Expectations* after it. The lead character, Pip, much like the prodigal in the parable, squanders all his wealth and is forced to go home. His loving, forbearing father welcomes him home.

The problem, as I see it, is that the parable is misnamed. We have fixated our attention on this prodigal son. Let me take you back to the way Jesus begins the parable: “There was a man who had two sons” (15:13). Both sons are lost. One knows himself to be lost; the other doesn’t.

You will see yourself in this parable. Some of you are prodigal sons and daughters. Others of you resemble elder brothers. You will find yourself in this parable somewhere.

At the outset of Luke chapter 15, Jesus shares a meal with “tax collectors and sinners.” Dining with someone was a big deal in those days. It was tantamount to extending acceptance and approval to someone. The Pharisees in our story cannot comprehend why Jesus would sully his reputation by sharing a meal with well-known sinners. That is why they mutter, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (15:2). People who mutter under their breaths are usually up to no good.

There were two classifications of people in Jesus’ day: religious people, who obeyed biblical commands and practiced laws of purity, and sinners, who pretty much disregarded them. Tax collectors were notorious sinners.
They were traitors, working for the Roman government. They embezzled money from unsuspecting people.

These same Pharisees asked Jesus earlier, “Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus replied that only those who are ill need a doctor (Luke 5:29-30).

Jesus tells three parables in quick succession to justify his choice of dinner guests. The first parable centers on lost sheep. When a shepherd who is responsible for a hundred sheep realizes one has wandered off, he leaves the ninety-nine to find the lone stray. Jesus concludes the parable, “I tell you there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (15:7).

The second parable concerns a lost coin. A woman who had ten coins misplaces one, so she sweeps her house clean to find it. When she finds the lost coin, she celebrates with her friends. Jesus concludes the parable, “I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who repents” (15:11).

The prodigal son story is last in Jesus’ series of parables. It is the longest parable Jesus tells and amounts to a short story in three acts.

In Act 1, the younger son asks his father for his share of the family inheritance. This is a gesture of unimaginable disrespect. The younger son requests his portion of his
father’s things before the father dies. Still, the father obliges. The son leaves home with his share of the family inheritance in his back pocket.

This younger son burns through his inheritance in no time, spending it on “dissolute living” (15:13). Jesus does not enumerate on what he means by dissolute living but you can fill in the details. When the money runs out, the younger son takes a job tending pigs. This little detail would not escape the notice of a Jewish audience since pigs were unclean animals. It illustrates the depths to which this beleaguered son has plunged.

This is the point in the parable where the son “comes to himself” (15:17). He knows he will fare better as one of his father’s hired hands so he resolves to go home.

Act Two shifts to the father. His father, like any good parent, scans the horizon looking for his wayward son. When he sees him coming in the distance, he runs to embrace him, no questions asked. In this shame-based culture, we might have expected this dignified patriarch to wait in silence for his son to come home groveling. We would not be surprised if the father put his son on probation until he demonstrates that his remorse was genuine. Instead, the father orders his best robe and signet ring for his son. He directs his servants to prepare a fatted calf for the ensuing feast. “Let’s cele-
brate,” the father declares. “This son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found” (15:24).

In the third and final act, the focus shifts to the elder brother who returns home after a day working in the fields. He discovers a party going on to celebrate the return of his derelict brother. He becomes incensed and refuses to join the festivities. Now it is the elder brother’s turn to disrespect his father. He expects his father, who is hosting the party, to come out to appease him.

When the father appears, the elder brother explodes, “Listen! For all these years, I have been working like a dog 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 [notice his attempts to distance himself from his brother by calling him “this son of yours”] comes back who has devoured your property with prostitutes [get out the shovel] you kill the fatted calf for him” (15:29-30).

The father has the last word in our parable. “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” (15:31-32).

That’s it! End of story. To my way of thinking, Jesus leaves us hanging. Will this elder brother join the party or stand outside in a snit? Jesus intends to leave his listeners in suspense. Let’s go back to the way Luke began this chapter. The religious leaders fuss about Jesus’ choice of dinner guests. Why does he dine with notorious sinners and not hold a banquet in their honor?
The tax collectors and sinners resemble this younger brother in our parable. They are lost and they know it. The Pharisees would never ever admit to being lost.

Do not miss the irony here. Both sons are lost. One knows it; the other does not. We can be lost, whether we wander far from home or are virtual home-bodies.

Jesus has religious people in his sights as he tells this parable. Elder brother lost-ness is so dangerous because it is so deceptive. These Pharisees, like the elder brother in our parable, look fine on the outside. They are righteous and obedient yet inwardly they are seething in disgust for unreligious people.

Elder brother lost-ness is a particular malady for church people like us. We are susceptible to thinking that the sin problem is primarily with other people.

When elder brothers and sisters experience pain and suffering, it rocks our world. This is not how it is supposed to work. Given all the money, we have given to God’s work and all the time we have invested in God’s service, surely we deserve better treatment. We thought there would be some payoff in the end. We feel like God has let us down somehow.

I identify with both sons in our parable. In my youth, I was the prodigal. I spent time in a far country, engaged in dissolute living. Let’s just leave it at that! I was far from God. I never darkened the door of any church.
Like the prodigal, I “came to myself.” Today, I resemble the elder brother. I try to do the right thing. I am obedient and responsible. I am susceptible to self-righteousness. I can judge other people harshly.

Rembrandt depicts this parable in his famous painting. The younger son kneels before his father. His shaved head and torn clothes evidence his long sojourn. His well-worn sandals, especially the broken one, reminds us of his wanderings. To the far right, the steely gaze of the elder brother displays his lost-ness. His arms remain by his side, hands tightly clasped in contrast to his father’s hands, open and extending.

Where are you in this prodigal son parable? This question constitutes the so-what application to today’s sermon.

You may identify with this younger brother. You have wandered far from home. You are far from God. You are squandering your life in “dissolute living.”

You may be a parent of a prodigal. Like the father in our parable, you scan the horizon for evidence that your wayward son or daughter will come home and embrace the faith you sought to instill in them.

You may identify with this elder brother. You have never wandered far away. You have been obedient and dutiful. You try to do the right thing.
You may vacillate between this younger brother and elder brother. One day, you feel like a wayward prodigal. Other days you feel like a judgmental elder brother.

The word prodigal does not appear anywhere in this parable. It originates from a Latin word correlating to “squander” in verses 13 and 30. Literally, the word translates “wastefully extravagant.”

Pastor and author Tim Keller has written an insightful book about this parable entitled *Prodigal God*. He asserts that the parable is not about these two lost sons. Ultimately, it’s about a loving father who finds us, whether we are far from home or have never left home.

Prodigals—come home to God. Stop your wandering and come home to God.

Elder brothers and sisters—come home to God. Stop judging everybody else’s sins and take responsibility for your lost-ness.

As I reflected yesterday on this invitation to come home to Jesus, the old hymn *Softly and Tenderly* began replaying in my head. Will Thompson composed this hymn some 140 years ago. It was sung at Martin Luther King, Jr.’s memorial in 1968 and at the tribute for the 58 people gunned down last year at a country music festival in Las Vegas. Four times in the refrain a phrase repeats, “Come home.” As you sing these words, come home to God. Come home to Jesus.