

“The Lost Boys”
 Rev. Eric S. Corbin
 First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable: ¹¹“There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A 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. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. ²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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.’”

In 1986, Henri Nouwen, a Dutch theologian and writer, toured St. Petersburg, Russia.

While there he visited the famous Hermitage where he saw, among other things, Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son. The painting was in a hallway where a nearby window bathed it in natural light. Nouwen stood for two hours, mesmerized by this remarkable painting. As he stood there, the sun changed, and at every change of the light's angle he saw a different aspect of the painting revealed. Later, he wrote this about his experience: "There were as many paintings in the Prodigal Son as there were changes in the day."

When we think of this parable, I think that such an attitude may be difficult for us. We've heard this story so many times that there can't possibly be something new in it for us. We hear the opening lines, and essentially dismiss the rest. But, as Amy-Jill Levine, a renowned professor of New Testament studies at Vanderbilt School of Divinity says, at the end of a parable "there should be some sort of challenge, some discomfort. If you can wrap it all up with a neat little bow and are comfortable with it, then you need to go back."

Maybe we are too comfortable with this parable. Maybe we need to look at it from different angles, as Henri Nouwen looked at the famous painting in many different lights. If we look at this story in different lights, perhaps there is more there for us to learn. And I think it starts with the title that tradition has given us for this parable. We all know this as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." That's the way most of our Bibles label this story. Calling it "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" puts the emphasis on the younger son, to the exclusion of the other son and the father. But that's not the way Jesus told the story. If we look at verse 11, we read Jesus' intro to the parable: "There was a *man* who had *two sons*." It seems the primary focus is on the father, and then secondarily on the two sons equally. The story tells us about the father's love for *both* of his sons. If this parable were only about the younger son, it could have ended after verse 24, with the father's rejoicing at

the return of his son. That verse ends with this great line: “And they began to celebrate.” Ending the parable there ties a tidy bow on the story. And that’s what we’ve been tempted to do. There’s even a ballet about this story, called, of course, “The Prodigal Son.” That ballet ends after verse 24. It makes everything nice and neat, but that’s not the story Jesus told.

So, let’s dig into this story, and try to view it with fresh eyes. We start with the younger son. We may or may not identify with him. Some of us may have been him. Some of us may have gone out and, as the story says, “squandered [our] property in dissolute living.” We may know what it feels like to come to the end of our rope and know that we can go no further on our own. Stories of “hitting rock bottom” are common in our culture. Whether we have actually gone so far as to hit rock bottom, there is something in all of us that has to learn lessons first-hand. Parents know this well. We can do our best to teach lessons to our children, but we know that our children will have to learn many of those lessons on their own. And that is just what the younger brother did. He went out on his own and learned a very painful lesson. When he left, he thought he knew it all. He thought that he didn’t need his older brother or his father; he only needed himself and some money. When the money was gone, and all he had was himself, he realized how wrong he was. And he returned home, practicing his apology on the way.

So, the young man returns, and we have this wonderful image of the father, running to meet him. This dignified, wealthy man, lifts up his robes and runs in an undignified way. It is beautiful. It is true love. It is true celebration, and it is something we all need. While we may or may not identify with the younger brother, I think we all should. For we all are in need of God’s unfair grace. We all need God’s celebration of our return after we have squandered what God has given us. We are all in need of the love which we have not earned, for love is not something which *can* be earned. And so, we should pay attention to this parable as as one of the most wonderful stories of the love and grace of God that we have heard. God’s love is a reconciling love. When we

squander the gifts God has given us, we separate ourselves from God, we damage our relationship. But God is always there, as the father in this parable, looking for our return, and then running out to greet us, such that we can barely get out our apology before all is forgiven. God's grace allows us to return to full relationship. How wonderful!

But the story doesn't end there. It is more complex than that. The story goes on to tell us about the older brother's reaction, and there, too, we find ourselves. The father's reaction is crazy! This son of his has wasted half of his property. He left, planning never to return, and yet here he is back home because he spent it all in frivolous living. Why should this father welcome him back with such a celebration? Why should he bring out the ring and sandals and robe? Why should he kill the fatted calf? It's just so unfair. It doesn't seem right. We might think, yes, let him return. He's your son, after all. But there's no reason for this partying. As Fred Craddock put it, we think "Yes, let the prodigal return, but to bread and water, not the fatted calf; in sackcloth, not a new robe; wearing ashes, not a new ring; in tears, not in merriment; kneeling, not dancing."

For when we are not the younger brother, we are the older brother. We are the ones who have been here in church, Sunday after Sunday. We are the ones who are giving of our time and money. We are the ones stewarding God's resources in a faithful way. The older brother wants his father to love him *more* because of what he has done. But the father doesn't work that way. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "He does not love either of his sons according to what they *deserve*. He just loves them, more because of who *he* is than because of who *they* are, and the elder brother cannot stand it. He cannot stand a love that transcends right and wrong, a love that throws homecoming parties for prodigal sinners and expects the hard-working righteous to rejoice."

You see, this father had two sons who were lost. We most commonly think of the younger son as being lost, but the older son was just as lost. He could not comprehend the unmerited love

of his father. He couldn't understand that the true nature of love is not based on rights and wrongs. Love is not based on what we do or don't do.

The older brother didn't want to learn that lesson, and so he refused to even attend the celebration. There was a party going on, but he could not bring himself to attend. The father comes out to plead with him, to try to explain the situation, but he won't hear it. The father tries to tell the older son about a love like the love of God, a love that rejoices over one who is lost, but is now found. Our text today has the father telling the son "we had to celebrate," but that is not quite strong enough. The Greek word is more like "necessary." When one who has been lost is now found, it is *necessary* to rejoice.

And we older brothers have a choice to make. We can join in on the celebration, or we stand outside and pout, saying "it's not fair!" I know from some experiences in my own life that it can be quite hard to be the one who isn't sure whether he can join in on the celebration, but God calls us to be part of the party when one who was lost has now been found.

You see, we play all of the roles in this parable, from time to time. Sometimes, we are the younger one, being wasteful and reckless in our lives. Sometimes, we are the older one, being faithful and doing the "right" things, but not so sure about welcoming back into the fold the one who has been reckless. And, sometimes, we are the father in this story. Sometimes, it is our job to be the one who welcomes back with loving arms, who gets the best robe and ring and sandals and puts them on this one who was lost, but now is found.

Amy-Jill Levine, who I mentioned earlier is a professor at Vanderbilt School of Divinity, spends every Monday night at a maximum-security prison, working with those who our society has declared unredeemable. She is working with them to try to bring them back into the fold. She is showing them the love of God, week after week, showing them that someone cares. And she was challenged on that by a student who asked her why she was not at one church or another every

Monday night, sharing with those who were *not* lost. She said that it is because of the example we are shown in parables like this one. She said “I have to bring back those who are outside of the community...[and this] parable says it’s never too late.” Our job is to be the ones who show others the welcome. Our job is to throw the party, to welcome back those who we aren’t even sure we want to be around, but doing it anyway because they are members of the family. This applies to our families inside and outside of the church. It often is hardest to forgive those who are closest to us because they often are the ones who hurt us the most, but that is exactly the situation of the father in this parable. He could have been resentful. He could have shunned his son. He could have made him the hired hand that he came back willing to be. But, no, the father showed him love, for he is a member of the family. He showed him unearned, unmerited, undeserved, unabashed love, and that is our job, too.

Jesus’ parable doesn’t really end. We are left with the brother still standing outside the party, still resenting the brother that he cannot even claim, saying to his father “this son of yours” rather than “my brother.” Jesus leaves the story open, leaving the ending yet to be written, and it is to be written by us. Where do we find ourselves at the end of this familiar tale? Are we the younger brother, asking for and receiving forgiveness and love that we don’t deserve? Are we the father, giving that love to both brothers, *neither* of whom deserve it? Or, are we the older brother, refusing to celebrate over one who was dead, but has come to life? Where will the story end? Will we join in the party, or stay outside and pout? The choice is ours, but the example of God’s love has been given. Will we follow? Amen.