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The prodigal son is one of Luke's most familiar parables, but I find that its power to surprise and move me is not diminished by its familiarity. The story is painful, joyful, redemptive, and poignant all at once. Maybe because all of its main characters are so familiar, it's easy to immerse ourselves in the story and get caught up in its emotional drama. If we look at each of the characters in turn it is easy to identify with each of them.

We have a younger son in the first flush of young adulthood, who wants to be independent, to break away from his family obligations, to see the world, and to indulge in all the pleasures that life has to offer. He moves to "a distant country" where he finds it liberating not to know anyone, to make new friends based on his wealth. But after he squanders all of his inheritance, his anonymity quickly turns from an opportunity to a liability. Without money or social connections, he realizes the depth of his mistakes, as he resorts to the lowliest of livelihoods just to survive. But then he "comes to himself," swallows his pride and shame, and returns to his father's home, ready with a contrite apology and an offer to work as a hired hand, having lost his place in the family through his own misguided decisions. But instead of being greeted with the stern judgment he expects from his father, he is greeted with pomp and celebration, making his rehearsed speech almost unnecessary. His father didn't need to hear his confession to forgive him, although clearly the son needed to be able to say it anyway.

What are the times in your life when you have been in a distant country – geographically, emotionally, spiritually? What has it been like to be welcomed back home? And when have you

had the experience of messing up? When you should have known better? When you have carried a burden of guilt because you were at fault and your mistakes had wronged someone? How then did it feel when that someone gave you another chance even though you had given that person no reason to do so? Have you ever been the recipient of that kind of acceptance and grace? If you have, you know the incredible feeling of relief and gratitude the prodigal son felt when his father forgave his sins, even before he had been asked. As the psalmist says,

Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, *
and whose sin is put away!

As a 21st-century Episcopalian, I admit that I don't find myself thinking or talking much about sin. I don't necessarily think of my actions as sinful – regrettable or wrong, perhaps. I'm not sure I even know how to define a sin. But in examining this parable, it seems clear to me that sin is a state more than an action – a state of being alienated from God and one another. So if sin is a state of alienation, reconciliation is a state of reunion. For that reason, reconciliation is a joyful encounter on both sides, as we see in the reunion of father and son.

The father in this story gave his son the freedom to make his own mistakes, but he had to live with the pain and despair of seeing him stray from the fold, and to come to terms with his own role in facilitating his son's choices. Any parent can likely identify with the anxiety of having a child go missing, and the utter joy of finding out that all is well. So happy was this father that he did not make his son feel guilty about the inconsiderate and irresponsible actions that had caused him such deep concern—instead, he ran to him, embraced him, adorned him with finery and hosted a great feast. His happiness at finding his son must have been matched only by his son's joy at his father's reception. The process of reconciliation seemed complete.

But then we hear of someone else, who doesn't fit so easily into this mix. There is an older brother, who doesn't know what to do with own feelings. Because he is laboring for his father in the fields, he is the last to know about his brother's return, and later he happens upon a celebration from which he feels excluded. He is overcome by jealousy and resentment, and he suddenly feels underappreciated. He finds that in the battle for a parent's affection, bad behavior not only gets the parent's attention, but seems to get rewarded. By contrast, the brother feels that he has been left out of this great drama by virtue of his steadiness and faithfulness. This character seems to me almost the most recognizable of anyone in the story (perhaps in part because of an enduring childhood memory of seeing my father play this role in a community production of *Godspell*). No one likes to be left out, and we have all experienced that sense of alienation even within an inner circle. But the father in this story shows his older son that his alienation is actually of his own making. Even as this son reminds his father that he has been there all along, the father must gently remind him that he too has been there all along. It is not a competition – the father's love is limitless, and there is more than enough to go around.

For this reason, as Helmut Thielicke puts it, “the ultimate theme of this story...is not the prodigal son, but the Father who finds us. The ultimate theme is not the faithfulness of [either of the children] but the faithfulness of God. And this is also the reason why the joyful sound of festivity rings out from the story. Wherever forgiveness is proclaimed there is joy and festal garments...The ultimate secret of this story is this: there is homecoming for us all, because there is a home.”¹ I wonder if Robert Frost had this parable in mind when he wrote that

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.

...Something you somehow haven't to deserve."ⁱⁱ

Luke wants us to know that we always have that home with God – not because we have earned it, but precisely because we haven't.

The placement of this story in Luke's gospel is important, because Jesus uses it to respond to the Pharisees' criticism of his association with sinners, particularly his practice of taking his meals with them. But the Pharisees' position is not that hard to identify with either. If you can identify with the son as someone who has done wrong, you must also know what it's like to be the one wronged, and how hard it is to get over a sense of betrayal or injustice. Like the Pharisees, we have a nagging feeling that to forgive is to condone bad behavior, and that forgiveness diminishes the reactions of hurt or judgment to which we feel entitled. Iyanla Vanzant has observed that "For most of us, forgiveness is a sensitive and very tricky subject. On the one hand, we want to forgive and we know we need to forgive. On the other hand, we believe that to forgive someone is somehow saying that what they did was okay. Forgiveness doesn't let the other person off the hook. It eliminates the hook altogether. Forgiveness is the only path to acceptance. Not until we can accept an experience without the judgmental story we often attach to it are we free to choose another way of seeing things."ⁱⁱⁱ

We are all guilty of being judgmental. We draw lines of inclusion and exclusion based on what we think is right and wrong, worthy and unworthy. Sometimes we do so in the name of godliness and righteousness, just like the Pharisees. But Luke reminds us that these judgments are imposed by humans, not by God. Moreover, God is not inhibited by our human realities.

At any given point in our lives, we may find ourselves assuming the literal or figurative role of the anxious parent, the thoughtless child, the jealous sibling, or the judgmental Pharisee. When we are faced with these situations, we must ask for the strength to emulate and accept God's grace, so that we may take up Paul's charge to act as both "ministers" and "messengers" of reconciliation.

Our time together at St. Paul's every week is a good place to start, because the liturgy in many ways models the drama of grace and reconciliation: we hear God's word, acknowledge our sins, receive God's mercy, and are invited to the table to share God's bounty in community. In the process we are reconciled to God and each other. How many of us come through the door on a Sunday morning carrying individual burdens and guilt, in the midst of worry or strife or even just coming out of a tense car ride on the way over? But then at some point in the service, "we come to ourselves," and realize that we are being welcomed back into our community and invited to God's table, just as we are.

So while most sermons, including my own, are full of illustrations, in this case the gospel has already provided us with the perfect illustration of its own message: God welcomes all to his feast of boundless love and unconditional acceptance. "Let us eat and celebrate, for what was dead is alive again; what was lost has been found."

ⁱ *The Waiting Father* (1981)

ⁱⁱ "The Death of the Hired Man" (1915)

ⁱⁱⁱ *Up From Here, Reclaiming the Male Spirit: A Guide to Transforming Emotions into Power and Freedom* (2003)