

I have always got a book on the go, but unlike my wife Treena, I make slow progress. Treena on the other hand, subscribes to the “so many books so little time.” However, my approach to writing about the Prodigal story is kind of like her approach to reading: So much to say, so little time.

I can't tell you the number of times I have looked at the parable of the Prodigal, but I can tell you that every time I do, I see something new, it speaks to me in new ways. I would predict however, that someone will tell me afterwards that despite everything I have said, they still think that the older son got a raw deal. People will insist that he didn't deserve to be treated the way he was. He had a right to resent his father's treatment of his younger brother and his neglect of his own faithfulness. I've had that same conversation every time I have preached on this passage.

We good, devoted Christians have so much trouble with this parable. Despite our good liberal openness, deep down many of us believe that there was pre-conditions on God's love, just as the Pharisees did. In this story, Jesus meant to disturb our ways of thinking.

In *Return of the Prodigal*, the late Henri Nouwen says that each of us will have some kind of identification with either the younger or the older of these two siblings, or both. And because of its familiarity, it is easy to make assumptions about the parable and its three players. Take the word “prodigal,” meaning “extravagant,” and “addicted to wasteful expenditure.” In this sense, the most prodigal character in the story is the father! The father not only gives his property over to his sons (the older son most likely got the farm when the younger son got the money), he lavishes love, forgiveness and acceptance on both of his children. He goes out to meet his returning younger son and in the same way, goes out to try to include his disenchanted older son. The father is prodigal for sure, extravagant

in his love. In the words of a hymn by Thomas Troeger, “A spendthrift lover is the Lord who never counts the cost.”

The extent of the father’s prodigal love is best understood when we appreciate the semitic background to the younger son’s actions. Biblical scholar Kenneth Bailey travelled around the Middle East for 15 years comparing current practices and traditions with those from biblical times. On his journeys, one of the things he questioned people about was the son’s request for his share of the inheritance in this parable. The typical conversation generally ran like this:

- Has anyone ever made such a request for their inheritance in your community?
- *Never*
- Could anyone ever make such a request?
- *Impossible!*
- If anyone ever did, what would likely happen?
- *His father would beat him, of course.*
- Why?
- *The request means, he wants his father to die!*

By asking for his share of the estate, the younger son was saying, “drop dead dad, and give me what you’ve been keeping from me all my life.” What he did was unthinkable in terms of his own culture, let alone ours. He broke all relationship with his father. To him, his father was as good as dead, He threw away his sonship—something he could never get back.

This is something he was well aware of when he hit rock bottom in the far off land. Often seen as his point of repentance, when he came to his senses, some scholars (and me too) think it is more likely just another one of his schemes.

As Robert Capon puts it in his book, *The Father Who Lost Two Sons*, what is happening here is not repentance, This is just one more dumb plan for his life. He says ‘I will go to my father and I will say, ‘father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.’ That is true. He got that one right. But the next thing he says is dead wrong. ‘Make me one of your hired servants.’ He knows – at least he thinks he knows – that he can’t go back as a dead son, and therefore he says, I will now go back as someone who can earn my father’s favour again. This is not a real repentance; it’s just another plan.

His plan reveals that the younger son never really knew his father. He didn’t expect forgiveness. He had to rehearse his speech and get it word perfect: “I will say to my father...” Of course, he didn’t get the chance to give his little speech. And for me, this brings us to the first major reason that Jesus is telling the parable in the first place: God’s prodigal, unconditional love.

The son’s returning home in a bedraggled, impoverished, famished state demonstrates his desperation to his father, who surely knows the way his son operates. The father sees desperation, but none of that matters. None of what has gone before matters. The father brushes aside the rehearsed lines. There is not waiting to see if the son has learned his lesson. No the father’s love and grace is bred in the bone, instinctive, unconditional. And that is the point.

Remember, the parable is told to the Pharisees, who at this point would be, I am sure, squirming and fuming. Jesus was telling them this story because they had criticized him for associating with “sinners” - not only associating with them, but enjoying their company, eating with them. The Pharisees placed strict conditions on God’s love, and upon their acceptance of others. They don’t understand the father in the parable. The father sounds to them like a bad parent rewarding bad behaviour. But the father was not rewarding the son with a feast. The father was

celebrating his own good fortune that his son, whom he thought was dead, was alive. Reward and punishment had nothing to do with it. The celebration was about the father's love, not the son's worthiness.

So, if we think the parable is unfair, perhaps we, like the Pharisees, need to get to know the father in the parable better. It's not about fairness; it is about grace. It is not a zero sum game, but a game of abundant, extravagant, overflowing on to the ground love.

This parable is for all of us younger siblings who are burdened under the belief that at home or on our own there is nothing we can do that will be quite right. It is for we who stomp off feeling confined by home only to discover we have broken the most precious thing of all. It is for we who carry a weight of unworthy, like our brokenness makes us unacceptable. Lay all that down younger ones, for there is a love and grace instinctive within the universe, a divine love and grace that you don't have to be worthy of that has been yours all along.

This parable is for all of us older siblings who bear the weight of distance we have placed between ourselves and people who don't live the way we think they should. The story is not just about another chance for the younger ones. It is also about another chance for the older one who was as distant from the father in spirit as his brother was in body. It is about another chance for those who may worship in church every Sunday, but are still distance from God, for whom the non-conditional love of God still feels alien and maybe not quite trustworthy. It is about another chance for those of us who want life to be fair instead of gracious. "You are always with me and all I have is yours." We Christians who have been carrying the weight of our own goodness in loveless duty and striving to hold it all together for everyone. We too are called home again by love. We are invited to lay all that down, come in and celebrate unconditional love.

And the thing I noticed this time? The story has no ending! Jesus leaves the unspoken question hanging in the air: will the older son go in to the party? Will the Pharisee and Scribe reach out to accept those they consider “sinners?” Jesus didn’t finish the story. He left that in our hands.

Amen