

Like so many familiar stories in the Bible, we seldom tire of hearing them. Jesus, as a great storyteller, continues to captivate us with this story that begins, "There was a man who had two sons." An outstanding preacher in New York in the 1950's suggested that this story could easily be made into a three-act play, *Sick of Home, Homesick, and Home*. My tendency has probably been similar to yours, to hear this story of the Prodigal Son and immediately judge this younger son as some wild, immoral playboy. I have been led to believe that by asking for his share of the inheritance before his father dies that he was desirous of his father's death — what horrible son would do such a thing?!

However, looked at another way, this younger son may not have been nearly so cruel and heartless. Perhaps he was merely a seeker after something; he had an urge to strike out on his own, to get out from under all the family rules and traditions — that's a pretty normal part of human nature, isn't it? God has given us this desire — made in God's image, we share with God a hunger to create something, to strive after things. No one typically want to hold back the promising artist for wanting to go to Paris to paint or a musician who wishes to head off to Nashville to make music.

Furthermore, given the strictly held customs of Palestine in those days, there were certainly many younger sons who were not going to inherit the family farm, who may have been forced to leave because the soil was barren, or the family plot too crowded, or the economy just too poor to make it. Jesus only says that the younger son engaged in "*dissolute living*," this means inappropriate or undisciplined habits. It is only from the older son later on, that he is accused of spending his father's money "*with prostitutes*" but how does he even know that? Because of course, the elder brother was not merely a neutral observer but is angry and has an agenda all his own.

So, as is typical of Jesus' teachings, the characters aren't such shallow or wooden figures as we might first believe. And what more do we make of this elder brother?

Neither is he as wicked as he's often been portrayed. He gets stereotyped as well; as being a stuffy, jealous, mean-spirited sort — I am guilty of having done that. Yet more realistic would be for us to see him as a responsible, hard-working, obedient, establishment-type. If, or when, we characterize these two as cartoonish, it allows us the luxury of remaining safely outside the story as observers but then the story loses most of its real poignancy.

The problem is that neither son knows what he is looking for. We might say that both of them are sick of home. The younger believes that he will find what will satisfy his hunger somewhere “out there” and in his search he will find what will bring him joy. The older son thinks that the completion of duty, fulfillment of obligations, meeting all expectations will be what brings him the sense of contentment and satisfaction that he hungers for. Basically, they both want quite similar things. The restlessness of their hearts has both of them working to gain friendship, recognition, and respectability.

Good people earn what they get and they get what they earn. Deep down, I believe that most of us live with that as the operating conviction — that we have to earn (or even that we deserve) what we get in life. After all, most all of us have worked hard and faithfully like the older brother and have made a decent life for ourselves. It is difficult for any of us to shake loose from this basic stance in life that you have to go out and make your own satisfaction and when you have done so, it is yours to keep. I believe this plays a large part as to why we have such a corrosive, eroding away of the idea of community and the common good. It's my money, I earned it, and I don't want nobody taking it from me. You earn what you get and you get what you pay for — there's no such thing as a free lunch, if you have a hunger in your heart and you wish to satisfy it, you have to achieve it on your own. And the sooner everyone understands this and

works at it harder, the sooner we'll all be better off. But, I believe Jesus' telling of this parable is saying, "Let's dissect those ideas a bit, shall we?"

In a story by the renowned southern author Flannery O'Connor entitled *Revelation*, the main character is a church-going woman who passes harsh judgment on everyone around her: the poor, the sick, and people of other faiths. In the closing scene of the story, she is knocked into the mud of a pigsty, recalling (of course) today's parable of the prodigal son. While there in the muck she receives a vision of human beings climbing the stairs to heaven. In the front of the procession are all the unworthy people she despises, while the proper people like her struggle along at the back of the line. The vision from Flannery's story makes the vivid point that the "upright" will be saved by the same grace as the "broken" and that those who come last in the eyes of the world will come first in God's eyes.

Many of you have likely heard it said before that this parable, so often called the story of the Prodigal Son might be more aptly named the story of the Prodigal Father. The word *prodigal* after all, means wastefully extravagant or lavish and it really applies to the father whose prodigal love refuses to give up on his sons. When we always approach life with the belief and attitude that only by my own achievements will I find what I'm looking for, the story of the Prodigal Father suggests that this is precisely what keeps us from understanding the wonder, grace, and love of God. The younger son loses everything in his search to find, to buy acceptance, and to make a place for himself. While the elder brother sees the gift of his father's welcome as neither earned nor deserved so he feels he cannot accept it.

If our thoughts about God are that God only gives us what we think we deserve, then we are attempting to control and limit God and God's love. Listen to another story that helps to illustrate this. A World War II correspondent named Ernie Pyle tells of a

German who was captured and placed in an American military hospital. The POW was terrified, violently refusing to receive morphine or accept any type of medical treatment. Only slowly did he come to believe that the Americans intended to treat him with dignity and compassion and he finally accepted treatment for his wounds. In the same way, if we live under the belief that God is out to get us for our wrongdoing, we fear that God is angry and just itching to lay wrathful hands on us. We make the false assumption that God is more interested in punishing than healing. So, like the older son, we place more stock in our own good works than in the goodness and grace of a loving God.

When we learn to hunger and thirst for God and rest ourselves in God's loving care, we begin to discover so much more to life than we could ever earn or deserve. The younger son found in his father's lavish welcome an entirely different kind of joy than what he had been trying to buy. The elder brother saw in the father's party a celebration that was not earned nor deserved so he distanced himself from everyone.

Now, what is one of the most remarkable things about this parable is that it lacks an ending. Jesus leaves us wondering how that elder brother will respond to the father's invitation to join the party. This unresolved finale becomes an open-ended invitation for any and all smug and self-satisfied people to give up their efforts to please God through good works and instead fling themselves into the joyful banquet of God's grace. The feast is here! By the grace and wonder of God, we are surrounded by joy, and vitality, and the blessings of life. God's party is going to go on whether we stand outside or not, whether we are willing to experience it or not. Sick of home, then homesick, both of the brothers were not really sure of what they were restless for, yet both discovered a most gracious welcome of God who wants to give us God's own self. By accepting the invitation to the party we too can find our way home. Amen