

LENT FOUR, YEAR C, MARCH 27, 2022

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is probably one of Jesus' most famous parables along with the Good Samaritan. Even non religious people seem to have heard some version of this story. To summarize it in a nutshell: a man has two sons, the younger one asks for his inheritance, his father gives it to him, he squanders it and finally makes his way back home with the intent of asking his father to take him in as a servant. The older son is resentful when his father welcomes the younger son back with open arms and gives a great feast in his honor.

Even with the most familiar stories I think the challenge is finding something new or look for some subtleties in the story we've never thought about before. When reading some of the commentaries this past week there was one particular thing that caught my eye.

What caught my attention was looking at the father's reaction in this story from an ancient Middle Eastern perspective. In fact, five times, the father does not act like a typical Middle Eastern patriarch. The first time is when the youngest son asks for his inheritance. This is an egregious request as inheritances are only given when the father is dying or dead. But the father, instead of throwing him out of his house as such a demand required, not only agrees to the request but allows the son to sell the property which Jewish law only allowed after death. This brings immediate shame upon the family. The villagers are angry because he has shamed his father and his entire extended family by selling a large portion of the family farm while his healthy father is still farming it. The father has given his younger son the freedom to make his own choices.

After the younger son squandered his inheritance he decides to return home with a script in his head of how to get back into his father's good graces. But as the younger son approached his home his father saw him coming and went to greet him on the road. But something that gets overlooked is contained in one word. We are told the Father ran to greet his son. He ran!

How many of us can recall any one of our parents running to us except perhaps to get us out of danger. How many times did our parents or, in fact, we ourselves, run to greet our child out of joy! I have a feeling that not many of us can say our parents did that or we did that. But think about that for a moment. Think about your parent running to greet you with open arms. Maybe they hadn't seen you in quite a while or you hadn't seen your child in a while. Think about your parent or yourself running with open arms to greet you. Now imagine your parent or yourself doing that after you or your child has turned their back on you and basically told you to go to hell. Would your parent or yourself be running to greet them?

But here, in this story, the father who has been humiliated and disowned by his son goes running to him with open arms. It's amazing! What is even more amazing is how the father breaks the mold of Middle Eastern patriarchy. Think for a moment the actual physicality it takes to run in middle eastern garb. The father takes the bottom edge of his long robes in his hand and runs to welcome his disgraced son. Traditional Middle Easterners, wearing long robes, do not run in public. To do so is deeply demeaning. A traditional patriarch would be expected to sit alone in his house waiting for the wayward son to come to him and hear what he had to say for himself. It would be the mother who

would run down the road and shower the boy with kisses. In this instance the father runs and showers his son with kisses acting just like a mother.

Picture this father running wildly to embrace his wayward son who is also deeply aware of the villager's reaction. They want to throw the son out, and are aghast that the Patriarch, who has been deeply embarrassed and shamed by this son would welcome him with open arms. That display of affection, love and forgiveness is mindboggling. How could this father, reject all the traditional laws of dealing with a wayward son? At the very least he should be seeking compensation for the inheritance that he gave his son before he even would address him. At the very worst, since there is no repayment he should be presiding over a ceremony with the rest of the villagers that would not only shun his son but oust him from all contact with his family and the villagers.

But here he is announcing to the entire village that his son is not only welcomed back into his household but is forgiven as well without any of the prerequisite requirements that the law demanded. In fact, the younger son doesn't even have a chance to give his rehearsed speech to his father. He is so overwhelmed by the display of emotion that he can only sputter out that he is not worthy to be his son.

Now, the older brother is incredulous that his father would not only welcome his wayward brother back home but is holding a banquet in his honor. How could his father dishonor not only himself but him as well? It's no wonder the older brother is incensed. We would be too! How dare the younger son be treated royally after all the heartache he caused. After all, the oldest son is the one who stayed home, being the obedient son, doing everything his father asked of him and now he feels very strongly that he is being treated like dirt. Paradoxically it shows how the older son, who lived with his father, and kept all the rules, did not see his father's love and mercy or know how to have a good relationship with him because he was too busy keeping all the rules.

In his rage against the insensitivity of his father and the good fortune of his brother he refuses to go to the banquet. Ironically, even though we might feel the older brother is justified in his actions, his refusal to attend the banquet is a blatant public insult to his father and, in part, is similar to what his brother did. Think of it this way. You attend a wedding and a son, who feels he's been slighted by his father, gets into a heated public argument in front of everyone. There is humiliation, embarrassment and shame about how the son is treating his father. This is what the older son has now done to his father. He has humiliated, embarrassed and dishonored his father in front of the entire village by refusing to attend the banquet.

Once again, the father breaks with tradition and goes to the older son. Culturally, the father is expected to proceed with the banquet and ignore the public insult. He can deal with the older son later. But no! In painful public humiliation, the father goes out to find yet one more wayward son.

This is who God is! At the beginning of this parable it says that Jesus told it because the Pharisees were grumbling that he was welcoming and eating with sinners. This parable breaks with their traditional understanding of God and shows the reality that God does indeed welcome everyone no matter what they may or may not have done. In fact, God will go to embarrassing lengths to make that homecoming a reality. The depiction of the father in the parable tells us that the father understood both of his sons. He understood that the younger son had a hunger to experience more than his village

gave him and respected his decision to depart by not making it difficult for him to have his inheritance.

The father also understood the righteous indignation that his older son felt. He wanted justice the kind that made his brother pay for his sins and not feel the sins he incurred had no consequences. He understood why this son felt that his loyalty seemed to count for so little.

We are not told in the parable what the oldest son's response to his father is. We don't know if he went into the banquet with his father or whether he welcomed his younger brother. We are left to come to our own conclusions, I think, because we have to come to grips ourselves with this risky, scandalous, God that runs full force to greet us, just like a mother, and lavishly welcomes us with God's love that is so freely given us.

God's love, grace, compassion and forgiveness is mindboggling and difficult to grasp and understand. However, be that as it may, our challenge is to be like our God, who ran and opened God's arms to the lost, those who are bullied, those who are discriminated against, those who are seekers and even doubters of the faith. The God who runs to meet our needs teaches us that we too must be willing to race out to the sidewalk, into the neighborhoods, and up to closed doors, proclaiming the promise of forgiveness, grace and love and extend embraces of welcome and acceptance. That's our call! And even more so today, we need to live it. Amen.