

Cultivating Relationships  
Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32  
Sunday, March 27, 2022 (Lent 4)

*There was a man who had two sons...*

And right away, some of us stop listening. Because we *know* this story. If you have spent much time around the church, the parable of the Prodigal Son is probably pretty familiar to you. And even people who *aren't* that familiar with scripture know the basic concept of this parable, because it has been used so much in popular culture. If I was reading a book where the author quoted this parable, I would honestly skip over the quote, because I already know the story. We kind of tune out because we *get* this parable (“I’m a sinner who has strayed from God, but God welcomes me back.”), and we don’t think it has anything *new* to teach us.

But God’s Word is *living* and *active*, and just like the father in this parable, God seeks us out, and God’s word meets us where we are, *wherever* we are coming from. So how is God speaking to us through *this*? How do we hear such a familiar story in a new way?

I think that the first way might have to do with *perspective*. One of the brilliant things about this parable is how we can identify with every single person in it. We have all, at some point, been the younger son who has wandered away from home, hurt the people we love, and is in need of forgiveness. We have all, at some point, been the father who is challenged to forgive and welcome back the one who has hurt us. And we have all, at some point, been the elder brother who just can’t let go of what this other person has done and the pain that they have caused.

But perhaps it’s not so much where we see *ourselves* in this parable as where we see *Christ*. We are used to identifying Christ with the father who welcomes back the repentant sinner and

showers us with blessing that we do not deserve. But what if we looked at this parable from the perspective of Christ being the younger son; Christ as the prodigal son?

Theologian Karl Barth talks about how Christ is the son who went to the *distant country* for us. In this parable, Jesus says, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all that he had and traveled to a distant country,” where everything goes wrong. The *distant country* is not just a *geographical* place, it is a spiritual, mental, emotional place of separation from the father, of pain and suffering and loss. It is a country that a lot of us have traveled to before.

He suffers there the loss of everything he has and ends up as a servant, as Paul says in Philippians, “...Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but *emptied* himself, taking the form of a *slave* (or a *servant*), being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” Christ is the son who became a servant. He travelled to the distant country, to a world where “no one would give him anything,” and he endured the isolation and pain and sin of journeying to the distant country *for us*. Barth says that Christ takes his place *with* the sinner, as Christ is accused of doing at the beginning of this reading today. Luke says that “the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” *Yes*, because God’s love is *extravagant*. That’s what the word “prodigal” *means* – extravagant, lavish, wasteful; love that is *poured out abundantly*. Christ takes his place *with* the sinner, Barth says, because that’s who needs his love the most. But not just that, Christ takes the place *of* the sinner. He takes the place of this prodigal son and brings us back home to the love of the father.

Theologian David Henson takes Barth's perspective one step further in asking, "What if God is the God who comes to us in the disguise of those we despise, those who have hated and killed us, rejected and abandoned us, those who annoy and frustrate us most, those who are excluded? In the guise of the sinner...the enemy...God comes to us and challenges us to participate in a radical, irresponsible hospitality that turns the rules of polite society upside-down. And if God comes to us as this, how do we respond? As the *father* does, subverting social norms and opening his life to the chaos the prodigal brings? Or as the elder brother does, maintaining society's values but closing off his life to loving the Other? In this parable," Henson says, "Jesus is asking us whether we will entertain angels, even if the angels look to us like demons, like exactly what we fear and loathe. He is asking us whether we can overcome our prejudice...to open our arms enough to embrace the Other...who is actually our closest kin."<sup>1</sup>

Like Jesus says, "As you do to one of the least of these who are members of my family, who are hungry or sick or suffering, you do to *me*. As you care for *them*, you care for *me*. As you neglect *them*, you neglect *me*." Jesus asks us, David Henson says, "whether we will accept him, even if he reeks of what we think is unwashed sin. He asks us whether we will embrace him, unclean and unsavory to our tastes, with the lavish grace of a banquet. He asks us whether we will run out to meet him when we see him lost, alone, bedraggled, and abused; whether we will be eager and expectant to do the irresponsible thing of living out the Good News. He asks us whether we, like the father in the story, have the generosity to accept him as he appears; or whether we, like the (elder) brother, will demand that God not be so irresponsible and insist that God come to us only in the ways we find acceptable."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2013/03/god-is-the-prodigal-son-reinventing-christianitys-most-beloved-parable/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

At issue in this parable is how we *relate*, to one another and to God. And there are two really interesting exchanges that can help us understand how we relate to God and to each other in a new way. The son in this parable comes to his father and says, “Give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” *Give me*. Later on, after he “comes to himself” or comes to his senses, he says, “I will go back to my father and say, ‘I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” The word he uses there for “treat me” is the Greek word *poieo*, which is better translated as, “make me, form me, fashion me.” *Make me*. This son undergoes a shift in his relationship with his father where he goes from *give me* to *make me*. At first he values his father only for what he can *give* him, but as he comes to understand the blessings that can be received simply from being in his presence, the son comes to value his father for what he can *make* him.

Harry Emerson Fosdick relates this to our relationship with God. He writes, “In utter selfishness, we forget God until it occurs to us that we may get something *from* God.”<sup>3</sup> He talks about how maturing in faith means that we grow out of crying to God, “Give me,” into the deeper prayer, “Make me.” We cease valuing God merely because of the things God can *give*, and we come into the love of God and the desire to be made over by God; to desire above all else the friendship of God.<sup>4</sup> Alan Fadling writes, “We’re all tempted to come to Jesus for what we want from him, rather than coming to him for mentoring, training, and teaching about what he wants our lives to look like.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer*, pg. 15

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 22-23

<sup>5</sup> Alan Fadling, *An Unhurried Life*, pg. 26

This parable demonstrates for us the transformation of going from a *functional* relationship with God, a *transactional* relationship with God, to a *loving* relationship with God; from a relationship with God as a means to an end to relationship with God being the end in and of itself. And the same thing holds true in our relationships with one another. We can often value this other person based on what they can *give* us or *do* for us. We can even do that with the *church*, viewing the church from the perspective of what it can *give* me or *do* for me or *provide* for me, what *need* it can fill for me, when what we are being called to is to recognize the blessings that can come simply from being together, with God and with each other; that loving relationships are not a *means* to an end, they are the end in and of themselves.

So the younger son in this parable goes from *give me* to *make me*, but then at the end of the parable we see a similar exchange between the *elder* son and the father. The elder son is upset with his father and says, “For all these years I have been working like a slave for you...yet you have never even given me a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.” *You have never given me*. The father responds to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” The younger son starts with, “Give me,” and ends up at, “Make me,” while the elder son says, “You *never* gave me,” and the father says, “You *always* were.”

Last week I talked about how, in Luke’s gospel, what happens immediately *before* the parable often helps us understand the parable itself. That’s why we have these first three verses in our reading today, instead of just the parable. Our reading starts off, “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable” about a father *welcoming* a sinner and eating with him, while the elder son is grumbling about it. So the elder son is supposed to represent the Pharisees and scribes, the religious leaders of Israel,

while the younger son represents Gentiles and sinners, those *outside* of God's covenant with Israel.

Now, this way of looking at the parable has been used throughout history in some very anti-Semitic ways, that God favors the younger son (the Gentiles) over the elder son (the people of Israel), but that completely misses the point of the parable. Because the point Jesus is making here is that the father loves them *both*. They are *both* his children. They are *both* a part of the family. They are *both* invited in to the celebration. It's just that Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees is that they think *they* are the only ones who deserve the father's blessings because they have been there the whole time doing what is right while these others have been living in sin. They feel *entitled* to the blessings of God. They take them for granted.

It makes me wonder how much we take our relationships with each other for granted, how much we take our relationship with *God* for granted. We think, "That relationship will *always* be there when I need it," and we fail to enjoy the blessings that it has for us right now. Life lived with God, and life lived with *each other*, is not something to be taken for granted. We are called to cultivate those relationships, not because of what they can *give* us but because of what they can *make* us, the kind of people they can transform us into. More loving people. More patient people. More joyful people. More generous people. More faithful people. People who can go from saying, "*Give* me," to God and one another to saying, "*Make* me." People who hear the voice of God saying to us, "You are *always* with me, and all that is mine is yours." In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.