

A Prodigal Parable
 Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

[prodigal: extravagant; giving in abundance; lavish or profuse]

As you may know, many Plymouth members have been sharing in a collective practice throughout Lent: trying to read through the Gospel according to Luke together.

One of the gifts I have experienced in this has been the sense of surprise
 as I re-read familiar stories with new eyes,
 hear them with new ears,
 let the stillspeaking God say something new to me through
 something so very old and well-known.

That didn't happen when I read today's parable.

Rather, it was the familiarity and basic truths that jumped out
 in reading and re-reading this week.

Sometimes we think we know something so well
 that we skim over the deep significance at its core.

If we're familiar with the story,
 we probably recognize which brother we tend to relate with,
 and so we move on.

But Jesus didn't intend for those listening to move on so quickly.
 He had something for them to sit with in this parable.

Listen again:

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:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So...the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living."

Eventually there was a famine – insert here anything unexpected that turns the tables on your usual lifestyle: devastating illness or earthquake or economic downturn – and all of a sudden his prospects were eliminated.

"But when he came to himself he said, 'my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father'...while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'"

Dad disagreed and welcomed him home – through the open door and into a party. When the older son heard the sounds of celebration, he was ticked off.

"For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends."

And the father's response? What's mine is yours! You know you're always welcome here – but your brother doesn't know that! We're going to show everyone that you are both equally welcome in this home – join me.

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As Jesus shares this parable with his hearers – an audience of tax collectors and sinners, Pharisees and scribes – he draws an unmistakable connection between *them* and the sons in his story:

sinners and tax collectors are the squandering, dissolute younger son;  
 Pharisees and scribes are the self-righteous, resentful older son.

They're caricatures that Jesus draws from those around him.

Tax collectors would have been despised by their society and religion because they were considered traitors – taking the Jews' money for Rome.

And the Pharisees would be some of those who despised these sinners, as they were the legalistic, religious rule-keepers.

The story Jesus tells them helps the sinners not fear the Pharisees' merciless judgments toward them; it lets them see that, as the younger son, they are actually welcome into the celebration.

It also sets the Pharisees face to face with their own decision:

do we choose to enter the party, knowing who else is also welcome in there?

Or will we forego all of it for the sake of our cherished rules of right and wrong?

Very often, hearers of the parable find we connect more with one brother or the other.

But a parable is not the same as an allegory – particular characters need not always represent one individual.

Our actions can – and often do – become those of another person in the story!

Sitting in conversation with this parable is an opportunity to search out in ourselves those times when we may become

reckless,

or resentful...

or even, as I believe Jesus intends, become more like the father.

I imagine this father standing at the door of his home,

arms wide and welcoming all to walk through it –

into God's Shalom,

God's Kin-dom for all.

It's a healing parable as well as instructive.

The choice to walk through that door seems all-important, as friends and neighbors and good food wait inside.

It seems a place we all might hope to eventually find.

But first we must check in with our two sons.

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Consider the younger son.

Perhaps he is the one you most recognize in your own life and actions.

Some families have called him the black sheep, or the "lost child."

Maybe he's the one who challenges you and brings out your inner judge.

He is the person who hurts the ones who love him most.

Clearly his father cared for him. Dad didn't deny him when this son demanded his inheritance immediately; even though such a request was equal to wishing his father dead.

And who knows, maybe this is why his older brother was so angry... his little brother went off, not caring that his family worried for him and thought he was dead.

Don't we all have ways that we hurt the ones who love us?

This is the younger son – in all of us.

He's also the one who lives for the moment's pleasure, not worrying about his actions and how they can be harmful to himself – a night on the town, a spending spree. Consequences are not uppermost in his thoughts.

Are there not times when we do the squandering? Are a bit dissolute in our choices?

Even those of us who think we're more the older brother type can recognize such moments when we dare to look.

As last week's reading from Isaiah asked,
 "why do we spend our money on that which is not bread, and our labor on that which does not satisfy?"
We all have a bit of the younger son in us.

So what? When we acknowledge these younger son aspects of ourselves,
 do we ask for 40 lashes and proclaim ourselves sinners in the streets?

The younger son in the parable tried that!

He didn't even get the words out of his mouth before his father embraced him.

All he had to do was turn and look for home, and he was welcomed into a celebration.

First he acknowledged those reckless, hurtful parts of himself,
 then he turned around... repenting –
 and his father led him through the door
 back into God's waiting Shalom.

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What about the older son?

Did he ever turn around and enter the party?

He was welcome.

He is so close to that door – every day of his life! – but does he ever really join in?

Does he want to, but just can't justify it because of the others who are also welcomed?

For this son there is always injustice in the way people are treated (for good or bad);  
 there is always someone getting a better, undeserved deal.

He follows the rules, you see; *tries* to be a good person.

I think many of us recognize these tendencies in ourselves – even those of us who feel more often like the never-gets-it-right younger son.

We work so hard to feel we've earned the right to walk through that door...  
 and no one ever quite lives up to these standards – especially not ourselves!

So *no one* is ever really allowed to enter the celebration.

We don't deserve it.

In his justice-seeking, this son forgets the prophet Micah's threefold requirement:

that loving kindness

and humility

walk hand-in-hand with God's desire for justice.

*These are the faults of our own inner older brothers.*

And again I ask: what now? We recognize that we all also have aspects of the Pharisaic, legalistic brother  
 in our expectations of right and wrong.

Can these older brother parts of ourselves also be forgiven?

Can we choose to turn around and enter the celebration alongside our younger brothers?

It is a choice we make each day... to acknowledge these broken aspects of ourselves... to turn around... or not...  
 to step humbly through that door  
 into God's compassionate Kin-dom.

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And how often have you placed yourself in the role of this parable's loving father?

Does it feel uncomfortable,

almost sacrilegious

to claim that part of yourself?

We associate this foolishly forgiving,

extravagantly merciful and

grace-filled figure

with our God!

And we are most certainly not God.

But isn't this also the very figure whom Jesus calls us to model our lives after?
That we might be the ones holding the door open
to younger and older brother,
to tax-collector and Pharisee alike?

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When we choose to turn around  
and desire to walk through that door,  
we are most like the father,  
called to forgive those same sons within ourselves:  
to forgive our own tendencies toward excessive self-gratification;  
to forgive our own reluctance to extend grace.  
*And* to forgive both sons  
as they appear in others.

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This is one of the gifts that Jesus' parable offers its hearers:
not only is it a reminder of God's ever-willing love,
but it can be a framework to check in with ourselves.

At the end of the day, we can ask :
In what ways was I the younger son today?
when did I hurt my loved ones;
when was I wasteful of resources...

*and am I **willing** to turn around?*

How did I act as the older son today?
when was I resentful,
without humility to temper my
anger at the injustices of others' actions?...

*and am I **willing** to turn around?*

And when was I the father today?
compassionate and giddy at the good fortune of others?
prodigally merciful and abundantly grace-giving?

The hard, *good news* that Jesus shared in this extravagantly grace-filled parable was for tax collectors AND Pharisees alike – neither are denied entrance into the celebration (God's Kin-dom!)
when they *choose* to walk through that door.

And neither are we.

Thanks be to God.