

Have you ever thought about why this parable has become “The Prodigal Son”? It could just as aptly be known as “The Absent Mother.” It could also be entitled “The responsible, reliable, faithful, yet ever so resentful older brother.” Most of the time when I have heard this sermon preached, it’s been from the perspective of either the wayward 2nd son, or from the gracious generosity and forgiveness of the father. There are certain bible stories, where I try to live inside each of the characters. Certainly, this story is no exception. At different times in our lives, most of us have played each of these roles: that of the doting, loving, apparently overindulgent parent, waiting, waiting, waiting for that which was lost to return. ; that of the younger son who experiences being brought low by our mistakes and pride, needing to turn back to God, confess our shortcomings, and feel God’s extravagant grace and forgiveness and new direction. And the older son, hanging out, doing the responsible thing, being faithful – overlooked, yet waiting for recognition. Feeling resentful, frustrated by the generosity and leniency with which the weaknesses and sins of others are dealt with – not wanting to join the party. In the Bible, one would think that in birth order, you would want to be the eldest son. But it turns out, the 2nd son, generally fares better. In OT times, each child was given a blessing, usually in the father’s old age. Upon the death of a father, his property and material possessions were divided into shares, with each son being given a share; but the eldest received a double share. When Elijah was coming to the end of his life, he asked what Elisha wanted. The reply was, “*Let me inherit a double share of your spirit.*” In other words, “*Treat me as if I were your first-born son.*” Along with the birthright the eldest son bore the responsibility of becoming the leader of the family when the father died. This law called primogeniture is found in Deuteronomy 21:15-17. It prohibited bypassing the eldest son to give the blessing to another child, yet we see that it has a shaky record in the Bible, beginning with the first inheritors of Genesis, Adam and Eve’s children. Cain murdered his younger brother, Abel, leaving brother #3, Seth to carry on. And on it goes. Isaac was Abraham’s second son, inheriting the promise instead of Ishmael. And it will happen again with Jacob & Esau. Jacob actually tricked Esau out of his birthright, by asking Isaac for it himself. And later with Jacob’s 12 sons, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are passed over in favor of Judah, son #4. And we know that Joseph was truly the favored child. The sons of Joseph, Jacob’s grandchildren from his 11th child, should never have received their grandfather’s blessing. Yet, when they did, Joseph tried to restore the societal order, bringing the blessing to the firstborn. Joseph placed the older Manasseh at Jacob’s right hand, and Ephraim at his left. But Jacob simply crosses his arms to switch the hands giving the blessing. When Joseph tries to stop him, to get him to give the blessing to Manasseh instead of Ephraim, Jacob says, “I know, my son. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations.” (Gen 48:19)

The other piece of understanding ancient Jewish customs was that the land you owned WAS your livelihood. You received it in trust from your ancestors and held it in trust for your children. Boundaries of the land were not kept in the county courthouse. They were kept in the memory of the community, where honor was everything. Break faith with the community or lose its respect and your property lines might be “forgotten,” just like that. A great deal depended on being and having good neighbors. When you needed help getting your crops in before the rain came, or raising a barn—or having a baby, or digging a grave—you counted on the neighbors, the same way they counted on you. You invited them to your parties and they invited you to theirs. If things worked out the way they were supposed to, then your children married their children, strengthening the bond between your family, and linking your farms. In this world, an individual had little meaning apart from his or her family. Identity was conferred in the plural, not the singular.

So in the story of what has become “The Prodigal Son”, the younger son would have received roughly one-third of the value of his father's property and possessions with the elder brother receiving 2/3's. He may have gotten tired of waiting around for his little piece of the pie, knowing the bulk of it was going to his brother. When the younger son asks for his share of the family property, he deals his father a triple blow. The very fact of asking for his inheritance would have been a grave insult to his father, suggesting that his father was "taking too long to die," and that he had become impatient with waiting for the old man's death. He not only means to break up the estate; he also means to leave his father, who counts on both of his sons to care for him in his old age. Whatever his reasons, he asks for his share of the family property and his father responds to the double blow with a double turning of the cheek. He not only divides his property between his sons, though he is still very much alive; he also allows his younger son to sell his share, so that his son can liquidate his assets. What kind of patriarch cannot prevent his son from carving up the family farm? Does the boy have no shame? What is money, compared to land that has fed his ancestors for generations? When people see the father in town, they do not know whether to shun him or feel sorry for him.

The younger son goes off to a pagan Gentile nation, since no Jewish farmer would raise pigs. The son apparently traveled a long way, imagining that he would find in some other country the happiness and excitement he had apparently not found in his own land. The result was just the opposite: he is reduced to indentured slavery, is forced to tend unclean animals. Not only does he "squander his property" but his identity as well. He "lost" who and what he was. Eventually he comes to his senses, which is a prelude to repentance, even if not repentance itself. While practicing a proper apology to his father, his father takes the first step, not only brings the best robe – which would be his own robe, sandals, ring – all symbols of status within the family – he "falls on his son's neck," hugging and kissing him, an outrageous display of affection. Patriarchs did not plead with their children; they told their children what to do. This father would have been well within his rights to turn the son away. The reaction of the elder son is one of righteous indignation: he has "slaved away" for years without appropriate gestures of gratitude. He comes home to the sounds of a surprise party that's definitely not in his honor. "What do you have to do to get a party around here? Do you have to go off and squander your inheritance before you can come home to be embraced, and kissed, and assured that you belong?" The party itself is what angers the older brother, more than the economic realities of splitting up the family farm. He focuses, not on what he has been given, but on what he feels he has been deprived of. The elder son has "written off" his sibling in his heart, referring to him as "this son of yours". No one asked him whether he wanted to be reconciled with his good for nothing brother. No one asked him how he felt about spending what was left of his inheritance or being known as the prodigal's brother, or wearing the second best robe, since the best one was already taken.

Both sons are lost to the father, making himself an alien – the younger son leaving his home, and becoming a stranger in a strange land, but the older brother, makes himself an alien in his own *home*, remaining outside and refusing to be restored to his brother. This story may cause as much discomfort and discontent in our heart as much as the older brother. Does the elder son finally make peace with his brother and welcome him back? Does he find it in his heart to forgive, and to share in the father's rejoicing? Or does he find himself even more alienated than his younger brother had been? We are left hoping for a conclusion that Jesus never provides. That's what the parables are all about: They invite us to enter into the story and to find the answers in our own lives and times. This is a story of coming home. It is about return to relationship – reconciliation is not always an easy homecoming. The return home may present all sorts of challenges. In what ways do we feel alienated from God and from those we hold most dear? How can we find our way back home again?

The love of the father does not love his sons according to what they deserve. He loves them, because of who he is than because of who they are. Sooner or later, we all come home, and wait on the doorstep. It is up to each one of us to decide whether we will stand outside all alone being right, or go inside and take our place at a table full of reckless and righteous saints and scoundrels, brothers and sisters united only by our relationship to a loving God, who refuses to give us the love we deserve but cannot be prevented from giving us the love we need.