

Ephesians 2:1-10

Luke 15:11-32

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Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Tell Me the Stories of Jesus

A TALE OF TWO SONS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Once upon a time . . . there was a man who had two sons.

That's how Jesus begins his story which he told to "the Pharisees and scribes" who were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

This story in Luke 15 — which we know so well as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" — has rightly been called the most familiar and beloved of Jesus' parables. "The prodigal son" is used as a stereotype to describe someone who has strayed from the straight and narrow, and then had a conversion experience. "The prodigal son" is a phrase that has entered into our language and is often used with no reference at all to the Bible.

So, how are we to hear this old, familiar story with fresh ears? One way is to get you thinking about some questions while I'm preaching this sermon. For instance, who do you think is the main character in the story? If we call the story "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," that puts the spotlight on the younger son. It's true, a lot of the story has to do with this younger son's escapades in a far country. But if we focus all of our attention on "the prodigal" we end up ignoring the other two characters in the story — the father and the older brother.

In recent years, more and more people are calling this story "The Parable of the Loving Father." I tested that theory in a very unscientific way by highlighting a translation of this story with two different colors — pink for every mention of the father and yellow for every mention of one of the sons or brothers. The father is mentioned twelve times, the sons/brothers eleven. That's pretty close, but remember — those eleven times are divided between two boys. The father has the last word in his conversations with his two sons. The father's actions control the story — the father divides the inheritance; the father waits for his son to return; the father runs out and welcomes him home; the father throws the party; the father is gracious even to the bitter, older brother. So, try something new — try thinking about this story as "The Parable of the Loving Father" and see how that helps you hear it.

Here's another question for you to think about: Why is the focus on the prodigal, younger son? The story begins "There was a man who had ***two*** sons . . ." The man loved both sons, was generous to both sons, even went out to both sons — to the prodigal while he was still far off and to his older son as he stood outside the house pouting and refusing to join the party. If we pay attention only to the prodigal son, then the

parable could and should end at v. 24, “And they began to celebrate.” But there are **two** sons — and we need to hear about both of them for the story to be complete.

Okay, here’s another question for you to ponder: Why is this story also known as “The Story of the Lost Son”? How many lost sons are there in this story? In verse 24 and verse 32, the father says the same thing about his younger son: “He was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found.” But what about the older son? When he heard the music and dancing, and found out the reason for the party, the older brother “became angry and refused to go in.” Even when his father went out to him and pleaded with him (to do what? Forgive his brother? Come inside and join the party? Rejoice that his little brother was home safe and sound?), the older brother chewed his father out and spoke disrespectfully to him. Let’s hope the father’s generosity and love were enough to rescue **this** lost son.

I’ll stop with the questions for a minute and offer you another way to hear this story. When Nancy and I were in seminary, we took our introductory pastoral care course with Dr. William Oglesby, who was a pioneer in developing the field of pastoral care. Dr. Oglesby was known for the stories he told in class. He also had a nervous habit of playing with his glasses when he lectured. One of his favorite phrases when he talked about the “human condition” was to call folks “cockroaches.” Of course, he was quick to identify himself as the biggest cockroach of them all.

One day Dr. Oglesby talked about this story from Luke’s gospel and surprised us all by focusing our attention on the elder brother. He asked, “How many of you are the older brother? Staying at home, working hard, keeping your noses clean, doing what’s expected of you!” He said, “Most of you are probably ‘elder brothers’ and you’ll be preaching to lots of folks who are mostly ‘elder brothers,’ if not literally, then at least in the way they live their lives — working hard and following the rules.” [As a humorous aside, let me mention that the Greek word for “elder/older” is *presbuteros*, from which we get our name “Presbyterian.” So, verse 25, which literally reads “His son the elder one was in the field” could be translated “His son the Presbyterian was in the field.” HaHa, right? Or maybe it’s a little too close for comfort?)

Ralph Waldo Emerson called this parable “the greatest story in the Bible” and Charles Dickens agreed. So, the story can stand by itself and still be powerful. But, to provide some context this morning, I read the first two verses of chapter 15, which tell us why Jesus told this story. Tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The religious authorities were grumbling and complaining. Not only was Jesus talking with “those people,” he was also hospitable — he actually welcomed them and ate with them! So, Jesus told some stories to some people who were “staying home, following the rules, doing what they were supposed to do” and getting their noses out of joint because Jesus was graceful to “those people.” Do you think the Pharisees and the scribes got the point?

While it's tempting to identify with one of the two sons (or, to be more honest, to judge other people as one or the other of the two boys), if we spend all of our time thinking about the prodigal and his big brother, we'll miss the message of the loving father.

I've been re-reading a very interesting book by Kenneth E. Bailey called *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies In the Gospels*. Dr. Bailey spent forty years teaching New Testament in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Cyprus. In his book, Dr. Bailey helps you understand Jesus and his message, especially the stories Jesus told, in the light of his actual historical and cultural setting. Hear the story of the prodigal son, the two sons, the loving father against the backdrop of the family and community dynamics in Jesus' day.

According to Jewish law, if a father had two sons, the older son would inherit 2/3 of the father's property, and the younger son would get 1/3 — but only after the father had died! So, for the younger son to say, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me," is almost the same as saying, "You're not dying fast enough for me!" It was an affront, an insult not only to the father but also to the community and the customs of the entire people. The neighbors would have heard about it and talked about it. "Did you hear what that boy said to his father?" But the story says, "So he divided his property between **them** . . ." — already an unexpected gesture on the father's part to **both of his boys**.

As if the younger son's insult wasn't offensive enough, he wasted his inheritance and got himself in a real mess in a distant country. No offense to all of you in the congregation who work in the hog industry, but for this young man to have to work with pigs was the ultimate humiliation — and then he wanted to eat their food! It was against his religion. It made him ritually unclean. What will the neighbors back home think when they hear about what he's been doing? Are you starting to see where this is headed? When the prodigal decides to head home, he doesn't have to face just his father. He also has to face his neighbors whom he has insulted by flouting "the way we do things around here." He could expect a rough welcome when he got home.

According to family customs of that time, the father might have received the younger son, but the father probably would have waited for the wayward son to ask to come into his presence. Then the son would have had to beg forgiveness, maybe even grovel some (his older brother probably would have been fine for this to happen).

That's why what the loving father does in the story not only breaks with the accepted customs of his community, but is way over the top! He runs out to meet his son (how undignified — a man of his position would never run!). He throws his arms around his son and kisses him (he probably still smells like the pigs). He orders his servants to get the best robe, a ring, sandals (he doesn't even give his younger son time to deliver his carefully rehearsed speech. "Yeah, yeah, that's fine. Servants, get to work! We're going to have a party!"). He kills the fatted calf — probably enough to feed the whole town — and throws a big party for the neighborhood. The father's reac-

tion and behavior aren't just unusual — they're unheard of! Which seems to be Jesus' point exactly . . .

Of course, if we end the story with the celebration just getting under way, we leave out the older brother. But, there he is, standing outside the window, looking in but refusing to go in and join the party. Since I've asked you so many other questions already, here's one more to think about. If you had been a neighbor who heard about what this younger son had done with his father's money, would you have gone to the party and shared in the father's joy? Or would you have thought, "If I accept the invitation, that's like saying I approve of what that boy did to his father and to all of us. It might give other boys in town the wrong idea!"

It seems to me that's a question Jesus is asking the Pharisees and the scribes who were grumbling: Are you going to join the party and celebrate or are you going to stay on the outside and grumble and complain? That's a good question for us to think about when it comes to God's grace in our lives and in the lives of other people, especially "those people" we think don't deserve God's grace. Maybe the older brother would have been willing to have his little brother come home — but at least make him pay for what he did, make him work off the debt, make sure he remembers what he did to his father and to his brother and to his neighbors. But, of course, that's not what the loving father did . . .

I have given you lots of questions to think about this morning — not to try and confuse you or to suggest that the meaning of Jesus' story is unclear. But sometimes we need to hear the familiar in a new way. We can call this story "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" and we would be right. We can call this story "A Tale of Two Sons" and we wouldn't be incorrect. (I had to give Cheryl my sermon title two weeks early so she could print the bulletins before she left on vacation. In hindsight, I wouldn't/shouldn't have picked this title!)

If Jesus' story has captured your imagination in a new way this morning, let me recommend two wonderful books, both by Henri Nouwen: *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* and *Home Tonight: Further Reflections on the Parable of the Prodigal Son: A Guide to Finding Your Spiritual Home*. Nouwen happened to see a poster in a friend's office of Rembrandt's painting/interpretation of this story. He was mesmerized and set out on a long spiritual journey, guided by this story and painting. His journey included sitting, studying, and staring for hours at the original painting in The Hermitage in Saint Petersburg in Russia.

In his book, Nouwen accuses Christians of spending our time trying to decide which of the two sons we are most like. Instead, Nouwen says, we ought to consider how to become more like the father! This week I came across a phrase that sums up the message of Jesus' story and would have been a better sermon title: "God's love is both/and, not either/or."

Does the father's embrace of his prodigal son mean he has rejected his elder son?
No!

Does Jesus' welcome of sinners and tax collectors and loving them and eating with them mean he doesn't love the Pharisees and scribes? No!

Aren't God's love and grace wide enough to embrace us all? Yes!

Whether we're more like the younger son who wandered off to a far country or the older son who dutifully stayed home, the truth remains the same — we all have the same loving Father who is always looking to find us when we get lost — in a distant country or even right at home.

“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God . . .” (Ephesians 2:4-5, 8)

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see.”

Let us pray: We praise you, O God, that you are slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We praise you that you reach out to us again and again, that we might turn away from what is destructive and turn toward what is life-giving. We praise you that you reach out to us with forgiveness, assuring us we are your beloved children, loved, accepted, and forgiven. Amen.