

Ninth Sunday After Trinity

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Our diaconal exam included the question, what can we learn from Jesus' use of parables? My answer then seems barely adequate to me now, so I might take this opportunity to revisit the subject and add an idea about it that has been presented to me in the meantime.

We should probably try to define what we mean by parable. Tyndale's Bible Dictionary has a very substantial entry for this. The Greek word sometimes translated as "parable" in the Bible is actually used quite broadly and is even more often translated as "proverb". It may refer to any number of literary devices like riddles, comparisons, "dark sayings," or full-blown allegories used to stimulate thought. We might settle on "any story with two levels of meaning (literal and figurative) that functions as religious and ethical speech."^[1]

I would venture to say it's a form of indirection which can be, surprisingly, an effective way to simplify and clarify. Think of how Nathan approaches King David after his adultery (2 Samuel 12:1-7). I'm reminded of an old computer science joke: Any problem can be solved by adding a layer of indirection, except the problem of too many layers of indirection. See, Father Winston's dad jokes aren't so bad after all, eh?

We can identify an important defining characteristic of parables: they require interpretation. We do not take them in passively, they demand our involvement. They *stimulate thought*. There are, of course, different philosophies of interpretation. Certain common strategies seem to form a solid starting point: put the story in context, and consider the target audience. Most professionals caution against the error of "reading too much into" a story. I wonder if there isn't also a danger of over caution? Obviously, these stories were first told by Jesus to first century Jews. But the author exists in eternity. There must be some sense in which we are also the target audience. I don't mean to promote liberal, relativistic exegesis. But just as the Psalms rhyme in ways that translate to other languages, maybe there are elements in these stories that speak directly to us as we are today. *He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.*

^[1] Walter A. Elwell and Philip W. Comfort, eds., *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2001), s.v. "Parable."

Finally, I'd like to share a thought on why our Lord is so parable-prone. Andrew Klavan, author and internet commentator, has pointed out that the parables draw our attention to meaning in general. We instinctively seek the meaning in the stories because it's so obviously there. Meaning is intrinsic to our understanding of what a story is. And if there is meaning in stories about stuff, how much more meaning is there in the stuff itself? In the world? In each of us? Ultimately, everything is a parable told by God, reflecting the meaning of Heaven.^[2]

So, "A certain man had two sons...." (Luke 15:11) Our Gospel reading today is quite possibly the greatest parable ever told. One struggles to characterize just how rich it is. Let's say there's a lot there. It's certainly bigger than any one sermon. Before trying to zoom in on it, I'll point out that what we have here is Jesus giving us a description of the nature of his Father. The Holy Trinity essentially telling us something about Himself. I can't possibly do it justice, but here I am.

It's popularly known as "The Prodigal Son" but it might be more appropriately called "The Two Lost Sons".^[3] I think it's important we not miss the point that the elder son is just as lost as the prodigal.

The story begins with the younger son demanding his share of his Father's wealth. Maybe "demands" is a strong word, but we do notice he doesn't ask. The Father acts immediately in keeping with the younger son's wishes, "and he divided unto them his living." Presumably, this involved transferring ownership of property, which was quickly liquidated since "not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country...." The squandering begins even before he leaves: a hasty, eager seller never gets full value for anything. In that distant place it continues as "he wasted his substance with riotous living."

Out of money, his distress is compounded by "a mighty famine" and he is unable to make enough to feed himself even as well as the pigs he's been hired to tend. In this distant country he is valued less than unclean animals. Coming to his senses, the destitute son realizes his Father would never treat his lowliest servants so badly. He repents of his outrageous behavior and determines to return to his Father and deliver a rehearsed speech, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee. And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of they hired servants."

Apparently, his Father was actually watching out for him. "... when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." The reunion is reminiscent of Jacob who, upon seeing Joseph after many years of believing him dead, "... fell upon his neck, and wept...." (Genesis 46:29)

^[2] Andrew Klavan, *Why The Left Needs Jesus* (YouTube, February 2021, Andrew Klavan).

^[3] Thomas R. Schriener, *ESV Expository Commentary*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol 8 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 959.

In the Jewish culture of the time, all this would have been even more outrageous than it seems to us. Taking an early inheritance is essentially wishing your Father dead. Selling your property and going away to live among Gentiles (who raise Pigs!) and there living riotously; this is behavior worthy of stoning (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). But upon his return, the rebellious son is met not by the stones he deserves but by outrageous mercy. His Father runs out to meet him, an act that would seem extremely undignified for an elder. He doesn't even wait for the son to finish his statement of repentance before lavishing him with a ring, shoes, and robe, tokens of full restoration to the family.

We see the mercy of the Father toward his wayward son, despite all he's done. We assume Jesus intends to illustrate God's mercy toward sinful humanity, and the author of our first lesson today speaks to that: "But thou hast mercy upon all; for thou canst do all things, and winkest at the sins of men, because they should amend" (Wisdom of Solomon 11:23). Now I doubt a KJV wink is quite as glib as it sounds today. The call to amend (repent) should not be overlooked here, nor in the case of the prodigal.

The Father orders the fatted calf slaughtered and they have a feast. "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

That, of course, recalls the two short parables that precede this one (Luke 15:1-10). In response to the pharisees' grumbling about the tax collectors and other sinners they always find sharing his table, Jesus describes a shepherd going to extraordinary lengths to recover a single lost sheep while leaving 99 others "in the wilderness". Having found the lost sheep he rejoices. Jesus concludes that "likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance." (Luke 15:7) Now there, I think, is a wink, aimed at the pharisees. We know there has only ever been one person which needs no repentance.

Which brings us to the elder son. Coming in from his work in the fields, he is perturbed to find his brother returned and his Father and all the household celebrating. He angrily refuses to join the merry-making and we see the Father once again coming out to meet one of his sons. Who responds resentfully when entreated to join the party. Having always served (some translate "slaved") his Father obediently he laments never having received so much as a young goat to make merry with his friends. We notice the exclusion of his Father from this wished-for party. He complains that after exhausting a fortune with prostitutes, "this son of yours" is honoured by the slaughter of the choicest live stock. In referring to his brother this way, he disassociates himself from both brother and Father. We can understand his reaction, I would dare say we can sympathize with it. But make no mistake, the elder son is in an extremely perilous state here.

The Father assures him: "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine." As Bishop Robert Barron points out, the Father is *relational*.^[4] Wealth and well-being is only achieved through relationship with Him. We see him pleading with his son to keep his share, which is in fact everything: "*all that I have is thine.*"

Despite his flamboyant, overtly offensive behavior, the Prodigal son's principle sin was separating himself from his Father. The decision to go it alone in that distant country was bound to land him in dire straits even if he'd avoided all the antics added for dramatic affect. For him the remedy was relatively easy: repent and return. The Father's love is all-powerful and mysterious and He's gone to quite a lot of trouble to make our salvation possible. I guess I've thrown in a wink of my own there.

The harder lesson, and the one more likely needed by us, lies with the elder son. The relationship with the Father, based on his love for us, reflected by us, cannot be transactional. It is an overwhelming, mysterious act of sharing. We must avoid thinking like the elder son, I've done such and such and so I'm owed this or that. "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it." (Luke 17:33)

I'm going to go out on a theological limb here and also try to follow Deacon Alan's advice to keep The 39 Articles more regularly in mind. Articles 11-13 are pretty closely related to each other and perhaps parallel to the problem the elder son in our parable is falling into. Article 11 is our statement regarding justification by faith alone. Article 12 states that though not themselves relevant to our salvation, good works may be pleasing to God when done in faith, subsequent to justification. And conversely, Article 13 states that what might otherwise be considered good works are nonetheless displeasing to God when not consistent with Article 12, indeed they have the nature of sin. Likewise, the elder son is out of right relation with his Father and even those actions he takes ostensibly in service to Him, are nonetheless missing the mark.

Our Father loves us beyond our wildest imagining. He wants us in relationship with Him. He made us for that. We only have to stay out of our own way. If we can manage that, eternity awaits us.

When we've been there 10,000 years, Bright shining as the sun, We've no less days to sing
God's praise Than when we'd first begun. AMEN.

^[4] Robert Barron, in *The Word On Fire Bible: The Gospels*, ed. Brandon Vogt, (Park Ridge, IL: The Word On Fire Ministries, 2020), 399.