

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
HOPE FOR PROBLEM CHILDREN
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
March 14, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

The gospel of Jesus Christ is about people finding redemption through faith. Beyond the confession of our sin, however, we are called to do for others what God in Christ has done for us.

We must not end the story of the prodigal son before Jesus does. The parable moves beyond the return of the prodigal to the resentment of the elder brother. Does Jesus want us to identify with both brothers?

Parables are simple stories Jesus used to make a point. It is important, however, to understanding the setting in which the parable is told. The **“Prodigal Son”** is the name we have given the parable, but the elder brother may be the person Jesus wanted his hearers to consider. The loving Father, of course, is the key figure for both sons.

Jesus’ best-known parable was called by Charles Dickens **“the most touching story in literature.”** It is, of course, the parable of the Prodigal Son, a classic story of the wages of sin and the joy of reconciliation. Millions of hearers and readers have found their own story in the story of the Prodigal. The father in the parable is perhaps the most beloved representation of God’s unconditional love and mercy.

It is unthinkable that anyone might misunderstand this parable. A part of its genius is its simplicity. Its meaning is accessible to young and old alike. Consider the ridiculous possibility that the parable has been at least partially misunderstood by most of us who know and love it. The first clue that something is amiss is that we tend to think of the parable as ending eight verses before its actual end. This is not the first time readers of the Bible have had the audacity to **“edit”** Jesus, but it is one of the most serious examples. The second clue is that the world, not Jesus,

has named the story “**the parable of the Prodigal Son.**” In fact, there are three major characters in the parable, and each of the other two is every bit as important as the “**prodigal.**” A better case might be made for calling the story “**the parable of the Merciful Father.**”

Jesus told three parables about lost things in response to criticism from the scribes and Pharisees that he welcomed and even ate with sinners. The first two parables are short and portray the joy of finding something lost. The third parable is considerably longer and ends with what can only be seen as a reference to the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees. The elder brother, who remained dutifully at home while his younger brother embraced the costly pleasures of the far country, is so offended by his father’s lavish welcome of the returning son that he refuses to attend the celebration. The father explains that he has the elder son with him always, but this younger son “*was dead, and is alive . . . was lost and is found.*” The parable ends with these words from the father, and we do not know the elder brother’s reaction to them.

Even when the entire parable is read or told, there may be no mention of the criticism that prompted all three of these parables in Luke 15. Without knowing the setting in which Jesus told the parable, some might feel the elder brother was altogether justified in his anger. Most of us have some kind background with sibling rivalry, and may be inclined to judge accordingly! Jesus was clearly defending his relationships with the common people, especially those deemed “*sinners*” by the religious establishment. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says, “*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. . . . I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*” (9:12-13) The question we have to ask is, “**With whom are we to identify in this parable?**”

We might do well to identify with each of the characters in this parable. Even the father, who represents God’s welcoming and forgiving love, can serve as a model and an inspiration for our redemptive loving. And who cannot relate, in some respect, to the younger brother? But, in fairness to Jesus’ original intention, we must try to identify with the elder brother. It is amazing how little attention we have given this character. We think of him as an afterthought, the anticlimax of the parable. He is the good boy who never ran away. Unlike his unappreciative and morally deficient brother, he is the respectable son, the son his father can be proud of. But this is clearly not how Jesus intends for the elder brother to be seen. Sin’s favorite hiding place is in respectability!

The elder brother represents the shallow goodness of the scribes and Pharisees. Such goodness is ungracious and unattractive. True, this brother stayed home, worked hard, kept the rules, did his duty. He sowed no wild oats and wasted no money. He did all the right things, but apparently with some resentment. If he had found fulfillment in his life and work, would he have reacted with such indignation to his brother's restoration? Had he been privately working to earn his father's approval and an eventual inheritance? Had he secretly wanted to go to the far country himself, and felt he should have been rewarded for not going? The evidence suggests that the elder brother was self-righteous, insecure, and resentful. Such self-centeredness is ample evidence that the elder brother was a sinner, too.

The two sons obviously illustrate two different kinds of sin. The younger son's sins were more physical and were expressed outwardly, while the elder son's sins were more internal - - sins of the spirit. The younger boy acted out his impulses and passions, but the older brother repressed his drives and appetites. How we evaluate and compare these differences will depend on individual and subjective factors. Are we judgmental or condemning of the person who is guilty of sins to which we feel vulnerable? Do we try to justify the sins of the person with whom we share a measure of guilt? Our individual responses might be good material for discussion, or might inspire important self-reflection, but this is not the point here. The point is that this father had two problem children, though their problems were different. We can't dismiss either as good or bad, but must acknowledge that each, like each of us, is a sinner.

Playwright Arthur Miller said **“the structure of a play is always the story of how the birds came home to roost.”** St. Paul expressed the same truth in a different way, **“the wages of sin,”** he said, **“is death.”** Sinners tend to reap what they sow. If Jesus missed us in the first part of the parable, he spoke to us in the second. And the deepest need of us all is to come home to God - - our Father, who never stops waiting.

Across the centuries many have suggested that Jesus' famous story should not be called the parable of the Prodigal Son, but the parable of the Prodigal Father. The word **“prodigal”** means excessive, and is usually used negatively, as a synonym for wasteful. However, what is the father in the parable if not prodigal in gift of his love to his two sons? God's love is lavished upon each of us in such a generous manner that the word **“prodigal”** might well apply.

If you feel called to be Christ's ambassadors and agents of reconciliation, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.