

Once There Was a Way to Get Back Home

March 30, 2025

Lost

Many of you remember the days before GPS, the days when we used to have to plan our routes ahead of time, study maps. I remember planning church mission trips and having to physically go to the AAA office to pick up a TripTik, their turn-by-turn guides to a destination. Then came printing out directions from Mapquest and eventually Garmins that we suction cupped to the dashboard of our cars.

I'll never forget a trip I took out west with a friend right when GPS devices in our cars were becoming popular. It was early in my ministry, I was living paycheck to paycheck, and so a toy like a GPS was far out of my reach. Despite our printed-out directions, we got spectacularly lost on our drive to Albuquerque—like spectacularly lost. On the way home, we decided to pool together the very little money we had and buy a Garmin.

We still made wrong turns, still got lost, but the machine was able to help us find our way back to our path so much faster. After one of these episodes, my friend named our new guide Jesus because it was so absolutely brilliant at helping us find our way home. That story comes to mind when we read today's Gospel.

It's perhaps the most well-known parable of all time, taking us on a roller coaster each time we pray with it. Actually, roller coaster is the wrong metaphor. Roller coasters thrill us, surprise us, but don't change us. If we are willing, the parables change us, pry us out of our complacency and into Jesus' ways of living.

Most of us have heard this story over and over again. Most of us even have a title for it. What is this parable known as? It's the parable of the...Prodigal Son.

One of the sad things about knowing something well is that it can lose its freshness. That's why I was thrilled to be talking with a church member a while back who reflected on what kind of hurt and struggle must have been a part of the younger brother's life before he asked for his inheritance early. Most of the time, when we hear someone preach about him, he's painted as an ungrateful, thoughtless, self-centered, immature, greedy, disrespectful child. Sound about right?

What was wonderful in this conversation was we tried to imagine what pain, what brokenness, what struggles may have led up to that point. Had he always been told he was second best? I used to know a woman who, I kid you not, called her two sons, "the heir and the spare." There's no mention of mom in this story. Had she died or been driven away? Was the father distant as he grieved, thus setting up a pattern of distance? We don't know, but to pause at the younger son's motivation and origin story helps this parable come alive again.

Now, these could be people we know. Now, they might even be our families, who are estranged or hurting, despite good intentions, despite trying to mend fences, despite a common history. As the great Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:

Everyone has a weird family. Everyone has at least thought about running away from home. And whether or not you happen to have one yourself, almost everyone knows what a pain a sibling can be—especially when there are only two of you, so that the “good child/bad child” thing hovers over you no matter which one you happen to be at any given time. For these reasons and more, the parable of the prodigal stays young no matter how old it is, giving all kinds of people all kinds of ways to make the story their own.

Just this week I had someone in my office say, “I’ve always hoped either my brother or I was adopted, and I didn’t really care which one.” That doesn’t get the younger son off the hook, though. You see, he didn’t just set off on his own, didn’t just leave dad’s household to try to make good on his own. This isn’t a first century Palestinian self-individuation / coming of age tale.

He asked for his inheritance while his father was still alive, and in doing so, said to his father, “you’re worth more to me dead than you are alive.” He was saying, “I’m more interested in your money than I am interested in you.” This is a story of estrangement, of lost relationship, of lost connection, of lost love.

Martin Copenhaver tells the story of a mother and daughter not understanding one another to the point that the mother wonders how one gene pool could produce two people so different from each other. In our parable, the son asks for his inheritance early, squanders it on dissolute living, sinks even lower into poverty, and realizes that even the hired hands in his father’s household have it better than he does, so he starts the journey home.

The Gospel says, “while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” What our 21st century ears don’t hear is that the father just saved his son. You see, in the Talmud, losing one’s inheritance to the Gentiles is so reprehensible, there’s actually a ceremony to deal with it called a getstatsah ceremony.

Here’s how it works: If he ever has the audacity to show his face in his hometown again, the neighbors fill a pot with burnt nuts and grains and break it in front of him, shouting his name and cutting him off from his people. In doing so, they make him a cosmic orphan, someone who truly has nowhere and no one. By running out to greet his son and lavishing his love on him, the father saves him. Perhaps most importantly, he changes this story from being one of repentance and maybe retribution into a story of reconciliation and redemption.

One of the critical dynamics, one of the things that is so foreign to our 21st century ears and yet is absolutely critical to Jesus’ message (and to our relationships, frankly), is that the father runs out and offers love and redemption, love and homecoming, without ever hearing the son’s confession/apology/remorse. This echoes the dynamics we focused on last year during Lent when we took that deep dive into the Forgiveness Project. Reconciliation is a two-way street, but forgiveness often isn’t. Redemption is the healthy soil in which forgiveness can take root.

I know this is a tricky dynamic, that real life reconciling requires honesty and accountability, but there's also the reality that offering love can provide the space for honesty and accountability to see the light of day. What we see when the father does not set conditions on his love is that the Father's love has been available to us all along, as I will tell Calvin today and tell every child in baptism, "there is nowhere you can go and nothing that you can do that will separate you from God's love."

Oh, we can sin, we can break relationships, we can hurt other people and ourselves, but God's love runs out to us, sees us when we are far off, and lavishes mercy on us even before we articulate our remorse. If you've ever been the father figure in this story, if you've ever been the one who was wronged and yet for whom love and being in relationship is your ultimate value, you know that this act of reconciling cost the father something, too. Beyond the heartbreak of his son having already said in no uncertain terms, "Your money is more important to me than you are," running out to reconcile with his son cost the father his pride, his honor, his dignity. The restoration of their relationship means more to him than being thought a good patriarch or father. The father throws away his pride and honor, throws off what society will say, not knowing if it is a good investment or not, but knowing that being in relationship is worth more than all of that.

Found

This is often called the story of the Prodigal Son. The word "prodigal" is usually portrayed as "wasteful" in this story, but its roots are "excessive, bountiful, copious," think "prodigious," which means "excessively great." The truth is, everyone in this story is prodigal, excessively wasteful. Sure, the younger son wastes his inheritance and his relationship with family and community, but then the father is extravagant, even wasteful, with his mercy, with his reconciling. The father is wasteful with his pride and honor—he has no idea if his son is converted, repentant or remorseful, whether he's back for good or back until he hears the next siren's call.

Our story today simply tells us to revel when lost love is found. If there were ever a man who deserved a happy ending it would be this man, but then, amidst the banquet thrown to celebrate the younger son's return, the older son throws a tantrum, refusing to come inside. A man of honor would not leave his seat at the head of the table during a banquet, yet this father goes outside, once again to reconcile with a wasteful son.

How is the older son wasteful, you ask? He is wasting this chance at relationship, at being reconciled, at a harmonious household. And for what? If the younger son's motivation were to be fulfilled and fed, the older son is fixated on being blameless and right. In fact, it is his self-righteousness that wastes the peace of connection. You see, you cannot reconcile and stay exactly who you are. There are concessions, often large ones.

As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, about the older brother: "It feels good to know who's right, who's wrong, and which one you are, even when that shames your father and breaks his heart, causing him to die a little right before your eyes."

It may feel good, but it's prodigal. It's extravagantly wasteful. Holding on to our righteousness when we have the opportunity to reconcile is just as broken of a behavior as is squandering dad's inheritance.

Conclusion

Friends, it is no coincidence that the words "stranger" and "estranged" sound so much alike. Our Gospel today is about three people who are estranged, and in some ways, the admonition in the story is to treat those from whom we are estranged like strangers...that is, the way Jesus treated strangers. He welcomed them with open arms, he offered them extravagant hospitality, he fed them and clothed them and celebrated them and gave them the space to embrace their reconciled selves. We're never told whether the younger brother reintegrates into the family, whether he and the Father have a heart to heart and mend their relationship. What we do know is that the Father laid the groundwork for that to be possible.

I'll wrap up with this reflection from Martin Copenhaver:

Is there someone in your life, perhaps very close, perhaps even a member of your own family, who is like a stranger to you? Rather than feeling ashamed that a relationship that was meant to be close has come to that, rather than despairing that a member of one's own family feels like a stranger, perhaps it is better just to treat that person like Jesus treats strangers, like Jesus teaches us to treat a stranger.

We are called upon to receive the stranger, to create a safe place for the stranger. In the practice of hospitality the stranger has a special role to play. It is by making room for the stranger—even a very familiar stranger—that we make room for God.

So let me ask again: is there someone in your life, perhaps even a member of your own family, who is like a stranger to you? Well, go ahead, treat them like a stranger.

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