

Luke 15:11–32 (NRSV)

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” ’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ ”

Would He Really Switch?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: August 23, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Luke 15:11–32

Among the most astonishing, even confusing of Jesus' parables is the one we have read today, the story often called the Prodigal Son. I remember hearing this parable as a young boy in Sunday School. And I remember thinking right away that I must have heard it wrong. Was my Sunday School teacher really saying that Jesus told a story about a young man who took half of his father's property and squandered it on dissolute living, but when the young man came home broke, his father threw him a big party? Until then I had been convinced by my parents as well as by the Sunday School that the whole point of God was to get me to do the right thing – to work hard, stay out of trouble and accomplish something in life.

When I checked my mental library, I found nothing in it like the story of the Prodigal Son. I found stories that said there was no free lunch in life. I found stories that claimed if you set your mind on something and worked at it, you would be a success, but if you were lazy you would be a disappointing failure. I even had firsthand evidence. Piano lessons. I was given warnings. I was told if I didn't practice I would fail. And sure enough, they were right. I was a miserable failure at playing the piano. I never practiced. I wanted to chase girls and act in the school play. And my piano teacher never gave even one party to celebrate my failures and bad habits.

When I heard the story of the Prodigal Son, I was pretty sure I had misheard it. So I went and read it for myself. Sure enough, the story went just as the Sunday School teacher said it did. I asked my teacher, "Is this thing for real?" And she assured me that it most certainly was. She said, "God is just like the father in that story. Isn't that wonderful?"

I was pretty sure this story was a big secret. At least I was pretty sure that my piano teacher and my parents had never heard it before. That day was one of the few times I recall that I was eager to rush home and tell my father what I'd learned in Sunday School. Needless to say, he wasn't as excited about it as I was. He said, "Don't they teach you the Ten Commandments anymore? That's what you should learn in Sunday School. You should learn all those places where it says, Thou shalt not. Thou shalt not, now that's when God is really talking."

I must confess, even as I grew older, I found the story of the Prodigal Son perplexing. In Divinity School. I once took a class about leading Bible studies. In a memorable session we were required to act out the parable of the prodigal son. Each member of the class was given a part to play. And since there were more people than there were important characters in the story, the story got embellished. As I recall, the prodigal son even brought home one of the harlots in the story. Evidently, both the prodigal and the harlot had repented. The class, all aspiring ministers, had more than a few hams in it. So the party thrown by the father became a rather loud and raucous affair. Wine and food were aplenty; song and loud laughter ruled. The party was a carnival of gluttony and hedonism.

Then, of course, the party pooper showed up. The most humorless aspiring minister in the class was given the role of the elder brother. Scowling, sulking, lower lip sticking out, he whined that it wasn't fair. He threw his arms around in disgust. He sputtered his words. After all, he had

been the one who had done what he was supposed to, and he got no such party. But his younger brother, who had squandered a fortune, got a banquet. He had even brought one of his 'women' with him, and she was sitting right there at the household table, celebrating like a queen. Had everyone gone crazy, he wondered aloud? Had everyone lost their mind? What had happened to common decency? And why was he left to work in the field while debauchery was rewarded with a feast.

The tirade had the intended effect. It took the wind out of everyone's sails, and decidedly took the fun out of the party. And this is exactly the place that Jesus leaves the older son in the parable itself. We are left with a bitter older son who has pointed out how responsible he has been, how irresponsible his brother has been, and how unfair it is that the younger brother gets a party. And if the truth be known, most of Jesus' followers probably sided with the older brother, and my guess is that most of us do, too.

And so the story, perhaps, leaves us thinking that Jesus' generosity doesn't pay enough attention to who deserves what, that in his rush to show the generosity of God's love, he has overlooked the stalwart son. He has taken the older son for granted.

But. With Jesus there's always a 'but'. Jesus' parables grab our attention. Sometimes, very often, they irritate us, just like they irritated those he told them to the first time. And then, the 'but' comes in. Jesus is always saying, "But take a closer look." He's always saying, "But you haven't seen the whole story yet."

This morning when we take a closer look at this story, we find some surprising revelations. Let's look at the very beginning of the story. The beginning is easy to pass over. It seems merely to be setting the scene. The younger brother asks for his inheritance early. Surprisingly the father grants his wish, right? Well, almost right. The father actually divides the property between the two boys. The father, still a young man as far as we can tell, hands over his property long before his death, and not just to the younger son, but to the older son, too. The father divides his property between them.

But it's even more interesting than that. The Greek words behind the English translation are filled with more meaning than the English conveys. The two Greek words, 'ousia' and 'bios' are both translated as "property." But 'ousia' more properly means being, substance or existence. And 'bios' is the standard word for life. So a more literal rendering would be:

"The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of [your] existence, your being, you substance that will belong to me.' So he divided his life between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his existence in dissolute living."

The father prematurely divides his very existence between his two sons. In a real sense, the sons ask to have their father's life. And the father unflinchingly gives up his life to them. The parable wants to suggest that the two sons essentially took their father's life. It's beginning to sound a lot like Good Friday, isn't it?

And so from the very beginning the older son is not as clean as he looks. The younger son's sins are obvious. The younger son is blatant in asking for his father's being. The younger son's dissolute living leaves no room for misunderstanding. He has squandered, wasted everything. He has broken a number of obvious commandments along the way.

But the older son is more subtle. His sins are more sins of omission. When the property, or better his father's very being and life, is to be divided, he raises no objection. He simply takes his half without comment. Indeed, the older son in all likelihood believes that he is getting only what he deserves. And then the older son stays home. He tends the crops and works the fields.

He is responsible. He makes the farm produce. And all along the way he is proud of himself for what he has accomplished. He looks out over the expanse of his inheritance and congratulates himself on how good a job he has done. He pats himself on the back saying, Look what I have achieved!

From the very beginning both sons head down problematic paths. Both of them start from the same beginning point: I deserve my inheritance from my father. This is the screw that Jesus wants to turn down. Both sons in a very real way believe they deserve what is not theirs, and both of them are perfectly happy to take it.

This brings us to the core of the parable. Jesus addressed this parable to the religious leaders and upstanding citizens of his day. And they were a lot like the older son. They had a certain level of status. They lived upright lives. And most of all they could not see their self-righteousness for what it was. They could see the sins of those who were like the younger son, the flagrant sinner. They could point their fingers at them. And they could say that people like the younger son deserve nothing, for they are bad. But we, they say, we who have been blameless and conscientious, most certainly we deserve everything that we have, everything that we have accomplished by our own hands.

In the end, we have two sons who wanted to have life, who believed they deserved life and demanded life of their father. Each took his inheritance and went his own way. Each had a strategy for life. They are the same strategies open to us. Paul Nuechterlein says it well:

One is the prodigal son's strategy: take the blessing of life from the father and spend it on oneself. It is the "eat, drink, and be merry" approach to trying to "live". Unfortunately, it actually leads to death, instead, because it cuts itself off from the true source of life.

The older son has another strategy: take the blessing of life from the father for granted and hoard it for himself. There is great irony here, for the older son accuses his father of taking him for granted, when it is really the other way around. This strategy, this strategy of taking it for granted and hoarding it, comes with a much higher quotient of self-delusion, and therefore it is so is much harder to see, so much harder to grasp how deadly it is. One can always point the finger of accusation at those prodigal brothers and sisters who waste their lives and so obviously find themselves broken and dead. The older sons, the taking it for granted and hoarding it people, avoid their own brokenness and death by pointing the finger at others. Jesus says that these people who stand outside the party, filled with resentment, are more likely to stay disconnected from the source of life, and are more likely to be you and me.

It is easier for the older brother to remain self-deluded, and so in some sense Jesus raises a greater question about whether he will come to appreciate the full abundance of grace, the full abundance that he doesn't deserve but which God wants ever so desperately to give him. The younger son is ultimately brought so low that he cannot mistake the path he has chosen for the path of life. He comes home broken, repentant and undeluded about his life. But the parable ends with a question mark about the older brother. His father says to him. "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." We are not told how the older son finally responded. He stands as a question mark and a challenge. Will he come to grasp that taking what he has for granted, as though he has deserved it and accomplished it on its own has obscured his vision? Will he come to realize that in truth he stands naked before God, and that God with boundless generosity says, "All that is mine is yours?" We can be sure that if the older brother comes to see this, the party streamers will fly, and there will be a feast of grand

proportions. And God will say of him also, “We must rejoice, for this son of mine was dead and is now alive, was lost and now is found. Amen.