

Lent 4 Luke 15:11-32

Today's Gospel passage is often called the story of "The Prodigal Son." But the word "prodigal" just means "wastefully, or recklessly extravagant." The passage, however, is not primarily about being wasteful; it's about repentance and forgiveness, so I think we'd be better off thinking of the passage as the story of "The Forgiving Father." When we hear this passage, we usually picture ourselves as the son who transgressed our loving Father through our sinful lives. Whatever our own particular sins may be, we relate to, we long for, we even expect, a loving God who will throw his arms out wide and come running to greet us. Our awesome loving God would do no less, and Jesus confirms it for us in the parable.

But as we are living more than 20 centuries after Luke wrote this Gospel and in a completely different culture, we overlook a few things that would have been readily apparent to the average listener in 1st-century Israel. Life was different then, the behaviour that Jesus mentions would have been shocking — if not downright unbelievable — to his listeners. Not the son's behaviour so much — rude children have been the bane of parents' existence since time began. Rather, it's the father's behaviour that would have shocked them right to their core.

For a son to ask for his inheritance from his father who is still alive is the same as saying "You're worthless to me as a father! If you were dead I'd at least get some money out of this relationship! Why don't you just pretend you're dead and give me my money now?"

Dishonouring the family is a serious thing. In many cultures — including the one Jesus was addressing — disrespect at that level was punishable by death at the hands of the father. By verse 15, Jesus' Jewish listeners were no doubt ready for the story to end. In fact, there's a 2nd-century Jewish story that ends similarly: the son gets what he deserves — he is reduced to the low, horrible level of feeding the most unclean animals in Jewish culture. At this point the son is cut off from the Jewish community and from any financial charity it would have otherwise offered him.

In that culture, fathers are revered and adult men of any social standing walk with regal stature — they don't run. Children and servants may run, but not an adult male, and not a father who has children to run for him. Thus, a returning son would be brought to the father, not the other way around. And in no instance would a grown man take off running with his arms out to greet someone — especially a son who had shamed him and his family as disgracefully and publicly as this one had. In order to run, the father would have to lift his garment up above his knees. Picture a grown man trying to do that while reaching out with his arms at the same time. Few things look less dignified than that, yet that's what the father in this parable did. When he reached his son, he grabbed him in a big bear hug and called for the best robe, a ring, and sandals for his returned son.

The best robe in the house would have belonged to the father himself, and the ring would have been the family signet ring — a symbol of the young man's reinstatement to son-ship in a wealthy household. Slaves did not wear sandals; they went barefoot. So the father is saying that he will take him back, not as a servant, but as a son. Yes, this is the type of father we want God to be. Someone who doesn't care what anyone else thinks, and will come running to welcome us home. And the lost son reminds us of ourselves so much. Verse 17 reminds us that it wasn't the bad things of his life that made the young man realise his error; it was the goodness of his father.

There's another son, however. The one we think of as trying to prevent the father from welcoming us back. Jesus doesn't say whether that son comes back in to the party or not. The father explains that the celebration is for all of them to partake in — as the lost son was also a lost brother. Remember that the brother refers to him as "this son of yours," and not "this brother of mine." We presume that the father went back in, but we can't be sure about that brother. His own pride and stubbornness have pushed him from the father's banquet. That brother symbolized the Pharisees whom Jesus implied had pushed themselves away from God. They believed that only certain people were worthy of God's love. The others were barred from the temple; the prostitutes, tax collectors, and those to whom who Jesus ministered who were not even allowed to enter the temple. The Pharisees considered them unworthy. But Jesus saw them as children of God, all of whom are precious and those who stray but come back are greeted with joy. Most of us, however, if we think about it, sometimes play the role of the older brother, instead of the lost son.

How many of us would be thrilled to learn that perhaps the leaders of criminal groups have prayed for forgiveness and received it, and could be justified by God and forgiven. If those ideas make us feel a little uncomfortable, we've got more of the older brother in us than perhaps we'd like to admit. We set the bar low for our own salvation, just not so low that other sinners can get over it also. For some reason, after God lovingly welcomes us back into the kingdom, we can find that we believe that makes us his chosen protectors of the realm — to enforce the heavenly dress code as it were, to keep the riff-raff from cluttering up the lobby. We sometimes act as though only certain types of people, with certain types of sin, are worthy of God's forgiveness. Jesus died for all of us, every one of us, so that we wouldn't have to. Anyone who accepts that gift from God is saved. Whatever they were before has been changed.

If we truly accept Christ's message to us in today's parable, we'll understand that it's not all about us. It's about the glory of God and our obligation, if we truly repent, to grow in God's love so we can help bring this kingdom to others — even to those we struggle with. That's what makes it grace.