4 C Lent 2025

As often as I have read and meditated on this story of the Prodigal Son, it still has the power to move me emotionally. When I have proclaimed this Gospel many times, I look out to see glistening eyes, tearful eyes, conscious of the border of time and eternity. This story brings us listeners to the space where God and the soul are in conversation, or they stay separate from one another.

But the story has some difficult things to say. This man has two sons. The younger son insults his father by asking for his share of the family inheritance. But instead of responding with offended honor, the father gives everything he has, keeping nothing for himself. He gives his property to both his sons, dividing it equally. On one level, this is a story about family relationships, and not meant to be a social commentary. The father represents the self-giving spiritual reality of God; the two sons—two predicaments in which people find themselves. The younger son will be lost in sin; the older son is lost in self-righteousness. Both are lost.

First, the mindset of the younger son. He finds himself in dehumanizing living. What little life he takes with him is quickly dissipated. It dissolves, having no Source to refresh it. It leads to emptiness. But an empty stomach concocts plans. He turns, and moves toward the father. That’s all he needs to do. And he comes home. The house he knows is the house of his father. There, the hired hands eat well. He prepares and practices a script to get back into the house of food, a script that acknowledges his sin, his straying from the Source of life.

He obsesses on his mistake, allowing it to hold him tighter and tighter. His sin has become his identity. He’s no longer son; he is sinner. The father shows no sign of holding on to the son’s mistake. The son is not able to let it go.

Divine love meets us more than halfway. Grace is proactive energy that seeks whoever is willing to be found. That’s why it is written, *“Depart from evil and do good, turn wholly from evil, do not brood in its way and do good. Having done wrong, balance it by doing right.”* It would seem to be required if forgiveness is ever going to be integrated into a person’s life.

But this is difficult to do. Letting go of sin is different than repressing the memory of wrongdoing. When wrongdoing is repressed it sits and waits. When it re-appears, it undercuts the capacity for joy. Letting go of past sins, we can remember them without identifying with them.

*“While he was still far off, his father saw him.”* The father has been keeping vigil, waiting and watching. At the sight of his son, the father’s heartfelt compassion covers the distance between them. This compassion moves him so completely that he runs, embraces, and kisses—sequential actions of overwhelming love and reconciliation.

We have a standoff—a sullen sinner, and a wildly joyous father. The father does not engage his son who would be a hired hand. Instead, he speaks to the slaves about how to treat his son. He is to be visibly re-instated, with wardrobe and banquet—a wholehearted welcome, because *“my son was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and now he is found.”* This is all the father cares about. Celebration is the only appropriate response.

*“Now his elder son was in the field.”* The elder son is a worker. He does not come to the house of his father from famine in a far-off country, but from laboring in the fields. He is not accustomed nor even attracted to the sound of music and dancing. He sees himself as righteous. His heart cannot stay focused on the abundance of God and creation. He is suspicious, and when he finds out what’s going on, he is angry. Empty of joy and gladness, his refusal to go is and join the celebration is an insult. But the father who ran toward one lost son now comes after the other lost son. The father does not let insult turn him away.

An angry complaint reveals the heart of the older son. Although he has stayed home, he has not stayed home as a son, rather as a slave, and his father as one who issues commands. He has obeyed these commands but not with the full heart of a son. He works with a calculating mind, wanting to be paid for his labor. But he sees himself as underpaid, and his father so stingy. And so, he lives with a smoldering resentment that has come to the surface, and demands the attention of his father.

These calculations are not part of the father’s equation. From the father’s point of view, the important thing is that they have always been together, and the father has held nothing back from him. At the beginning of the story, the father divided and shared all he had with *both sons.*  But the older son did not focus on the presence and self-giving of the Father. Instead, he has fabricated a demanding father who withholds love from the one who deserves it, while giving love to the one who does not deserve it. No inequality or favoritism, this is the inner world the older brother inhabits.

The older son’s lack of joy makes him a lost son, like his brother, but with different motivation. He has chosen the identity of a hired hand, with all the resentments and angers that enforced employment brings. If the older son had lived in the house and fields of his father as a free and vibrant worker in the vineyard, he would now be dancing in celebration at the return of his brother. Celebration is just the natural overflow of divine love—the nature of God who finds the lost and brings the dead back to life.

The revelation of God as grace should make us rejoice. And so, before we can celebrate, we must deal with the mindsets that the appearance of grace uncovers. We are attached to our past sins. We cannot quite believe we are sons and daughters of love. This keeps us from joy. Also, we are alienated from the simple presence of abundance, and so we work for reward, and find ourselves resentful and envious. This, too, keeps us from joy. Only when we break the stranglehold of these two blocking mindsets will we hear the music in the house and know that we are home.

