

## Fourth Sunday of Lent Year C, 2025

Jos 5:9-12 2 Cor 5:17-21

Ps 34 Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

### *The death of the father*

The parable of the prodigal son, as it is called, is one of Jesus's best-known parables. The simplicity of the narrative is what makes it so attractive. Each of the characters – the father, the elder son, and the younger son – are all relatable. And yet, for two millennia now, we have been reading this parable, hearing this parable, thinking about this parable, praying, and writing, and preaching about this parable. For such a simple and straightforward story, the story of the prodigal son, the merciful father, and the disaffected brother refuses to be exhausted. It continues to capture our imagination, pull at our hearts, challenge us, inspire us.

Frankly, I have to be careful when I read this gospel passage out loud. Nearly every time, its emotional power, its pathos, brings me to the point of tears. Especially the words and actions of the father ... to each of his two sons. How he restores each of them to himself, one from his angry resentment, the other from his adolescent dissipation – and to each other. Both of the sons are selfish, self-centered, self-oriented. The father alone in this parable is altruistic, other-centered, other-oriented. The sons, both of them, seek *what* is theirs, what belongs *to* them. The father seeks *who* is his, who belongs *with* him. The sons seek things – pleasure, friends, happiness, independence, wealth, status – possession. The father seeks his sons – relation. The sons take. The father gives ... and forgives. The contrasts are endless.

But for the purposes of our reflection today, I want to highlight an aspect of this parable that caught my attention while reading and praying with the parable over a year ago, when I last had an occasion to reflect and preach on it. Let's examine more carefully what the younger son asks of his father, and what it signifies both practically and symbolically.

*"Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me."* From the parable we get the sense that the father is a wealthy man. He has servants and hired workers. He has fine robes and jewelry. He has property. When the younger son asks for his share, the father divides the whole estate between his two sons. According to the Old Testament (Dt 21:15ff), the firstborn son inherits double any other heir. So here, on a practical level, we can imagine the father as likely assigning two-thirds of his whole estate to his eldest son and one-third to his younger son. The father is not obliged to do this while he is alive, but he does it anyway, with forbearance toward the hostile demand of his younger son and with uncommon paternal generosity.

But the younger son then does the unthinkable. He takes a few days to liquidate what has been assigned to him: houses, properties, livestock, finery, and so forth. He then collects his belongings and leaves, cash in hand, forsaking his father, his brother, and his homeland.

It is hard not to see the younger son's request and actions as treachery, a betrayal. He wasn't asking his father merely to get his will in order, to make sure that provisions were made for a smooth succession upon his death. He wanted possession now of what would be his due upon his father's death. It's as if he were saying: "I don't want to wait until you're dead, dad. I want your things, now. Those things that belong to you now that will be mine after you're dead, I want them now." Implied in what he says is that *he wants the death of his father*. He wants that separation from his father that only death can bring: no longer to be beholden to his father as a son; no longer to have a father to whom to be beholden.

And what does that separation represent for the younger son? With no superior, he is no longer an inferior. This means independence, freedom, autonomy. But once separated from his father, whom he had spiritually killed off, the younger son then squandered all he had hoped to gain, and his life turns to squalor. No longer independent, free, or autonomous, he was homeless and starving. The separation he wanted, the separation of death, is precisely what the younger son got. But it was not his father who died. He died. This is what the father words at the end of the parable reveal: *my son was dead, your brother was dead*. Morally corrupt, spiritually wrecked, miserably unhappy, the younger son somehow comes to his senses. He remembers a happier time, a happier place. He remembers the goodness of his father. Repentant, hoping, trusting, he returns.

For those of us who have had good relationships with our fathers, the younger son's attitude and actions might seem hard to fathom. For those of us who have had fraught relationships with our fathers, this aspect of the parable might hit uncomfortably close to home. No matter.

When it comes to our relationship with the heavenly Father, there is something of the younger son in each of us. We ask so much of God. We ask ... and even at times demand ... so much from God. And quite often, we want to God to give us what we want and then to be left alone. We want the gifts of God, not God, the giver of gifts. We seek the consolations of God, not the God of consolations. While God desires relationship with us – *you will be my people and I will be your God*<sup>1</sup> – we want only what God can give us – a land flowing with milk and honey, meaning prosperity, peace, abundance. We want to have for ourselves what God can provide, but we are rather careless about cultivating a relationship with the God who can provide. We want possession, not relation.

In that, we bear too close a resemblance to the younger son in the demand he makes of his father and in the consequences implied by that demand. Once we get what we want from God, we are done with him. We seek to separate and isolate ourselves from him so as to “enjoy” some supposed independence, freedom, and autonomy. But the parable shows us how that far too often turns out.

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<sup>1</sup> Ex 6:7; Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 30:22; Ezek 36:28

And in our failure to appreciate all that God has already given us – *everything I have is yours* – we bear an uncanny resemblance to the elder son: unaware, unappreciative, wrongly resentful.

In the simple and straightforward narrative of this parable, the deep and ancient psychological drama between parents and children in general, but between fathers and sons in particular, is put on display in all its complexity. In the parable, Jesus builds upon the word spoken by the Lord God through the prophet Malachi (3:24): one will come who “*will turn the heart of fathers to their sons and the heart of sons to their fathers.*” This parable is, at its core, the story first told in Genesis itself: the original unity of creation; the rupture of sin; restoration through repentance and reconciliation.

And that is what makes the prodigal son such a remarkable parable for us to ponder. For each of us, according to our own experience, understanding, and circumstances, can find something of ourselves somewhere in this parable or relate to it somehow. In that, it is a perfect parable for Lent, isn't it? All the elements are there: sin and the isolation of sin; restoration through repentance and reconciliation; the one who was lost is now found; the one who was dead comes to life again. Whichever son lives within us, now is the time to seek relation, not possession. Now is time to come to our senses, get up, and go back to the father, who kind and merciful, slow to anger and *filled with compassion* toward all his children.