

Lent 4. Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32. March 31, 2019.

We are quick to allegorize this parable. I have seen readings of it that make a good case in presenting Jesus as the prodigal, us as the prodigal, us as the elder son, us as called to be the father, Jesus as the father, and once even rebelling angels as the older son, with Adam and Eve as the prodigal son and God as the Father. It's not wrong to read this parable as an allegory—I think Luke invites us to do so with the frame of the conflict between Jesus, with his disreputable friends versus the responsible, faithful people of his time.

But, one of the great privileges of my job is that I get invited to see the ways that y'all are misbehaving. When we are in right relationship, you come to me with the ways that your life is a mess. And if I'm on my game, then part of that conversation is exploring what about that mess was your doing and what was someone else's doing. It gives me great pleasure to affirm that most of you, in an old turn of phrase, are more sinned against than sinning. But what really matters here is not just the ways we may be misbehaving, but all of the complicated, ambiguous, shades of grey ways that our lives and relationships are broken.

In our rush to allegorize this story, we are prone to miss just how accurate an analysis it is of the ways that we and our families tend to break. Of course this is a story about the unfair, unbreakable love of God for each of us—the faithful, the prodigal, the repentant. But it is also a story about me and my literal brother and mother; your sister, your children. Who among us, with siblings, hasn't found ourselves in the role of one of these brothers? Who among us with kids hasn't found ourselves in the role of the father?

Perhaps we left home thirty years ago for very good reasons, and now in our parents' last years with failing health we agonize through the silences from our sister back home, who is carrying the weight of the daily care. Or the reverse: we already held our father's hand all the way down to the grave and now as mom is getting worse, we are the ones onsite having the conversations about how long she can stay in the house, while our brother complains about how busy he is at work three hundred miles away. Or a different kind of parallel, our literal parents may always have favored us or one of our siblings, for no apparent good reason. Our own children at odds with each other, and us unable to reconcile them and our efforts perhaps making things even worse. And the result of course is going to be long deep trenches of resentment running through our relationships.

Before we rush to make this parable about the ways that we are reconciled to God, let's just pause and let it name our relationships with the people we love or know we should love. It is good sometimes just to pause and name our wounds and scars, without skipping straight to the balm that soothes us. But, if the parable of the prodigal son accurately names many of the ways that we are broken, it offers also a possible path to healing. Since it is Jesus who is talking, I'm afraid that it is a challenging path. Jesus,

through this parable, teaches us that the only thing that can heal us is love: unfair, unbreakable, unbridled love; shared without regard for worth or merit. And of course, the vehicle that love drives is forgiveness.

This is maybe the hardest path through our resentments and pain, and it does no good to talk about love with dewy eyes, pretending that it easily solves all problems. It is hard, and it isn't guaranteed to get us everything we want. Notice that the father of the parable loves both sons absolutely, and the parable ends without us knowing whether the brothers are reconciled. We don't follow the father's love because of any spurious promise of an easy fix. Rather, we follow it because we know that it is the way to live truthfully in a situation that has no easy fixes. Our lives are in so many ways fractured, and not everything gets fixed. But we can live truthfully even through the fractures by refusing to be reduced to something less than love. By insisting on offering forgiveness even when that forgiveness is offensive to others. By giving what is ours in love, and not as payment for services rendered.

I don't recommend trying to do this alone. We don't hear of a community around any of these characters, and that may be exacerbating the grief of the story. To love our way through the pain and resentment that is going to accrue in any intimate relationships, we need friends who will help us know how to love, who will hold us accountable to forgive. And finally, we need the love of God. For it is really that love that we are borrowing only to share, that love that is driving through our imperfect attempts to forgive. And it is only that love that will heal us and our beloveds, only that love that will bring us all home. Amen.