

THE WHOLE WORLD WHOLE
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March 6, 2016
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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We have before us this morning one of the most popular parables ever told by Jesus: "The Prodigal Son." But it may not mean what we've been taught. "Prodigal" means "wastefully and recklessly extravagant." As you're about to see, the father in this parable is as prodigal as the son.

A father had two sons. The younger claimed his inheritance and went off to a far country where he squandered the whole of it and ended up starving. He came to his senses and went home to beg his father for forgiveness. The father welcomed him, ignored his request for forgiveness and showered him with a ring, a robe and a big party. Nothing but extravagant love and affection for that wayward son. (Luke 15:1-32)

So the parable could be called "The Prodigal Father," or "Prodigal Love." Or it could be called "The Parable of the Elder Son" who stayed home, did his duty and was left out of the party.

Belatedly, the father realized his mistake and went out to console the slighted and now angry older son. *Please join the party*, he pleaded. But it was too late. The parable ends with father and son standing outside the house.

What are we to make of that?

Christians are notorious for using this parable to disparage Judaism. The younger son, it's been said, represents Christianity and Christians who's God is like that father, merciful and forgiving. The older son represents Judaism who's God is vindictive and unforgiving. Jews, we've been told, are like the older son—enslaved by a joyless, dutiful adherence to law and ignorant of grace.

But, as it so happens, Jesus served that so called Old Testament God who is often portrayed as full of mercy and steadfast love, forgiving time and time again. Jesus embodied and practiced the characteristics of that God.

Over the years, I've grown suspicious of Christian interpretations of the Bible, all of which was written by Jews. So I've learned to consult with our Jewish friends to see what they see.

In particular I've consulted with Amy Jill Levine who teaches New Testament studies at Vanderbilt and who happens to be Jewish. Last year I read her book *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. It was an eye-opener.

For starters she says: any story that begins with a "father had two sons" would have put first century Jews on high alert. Their tradition had many such stories.

Adam had two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain, out of sibling jealousy, killed Abel. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Each, out of jealousy, despised the other. Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Each, out of jealousy, swore to kill the other. In each case one son perceived the father as playing favorites.

A father had two sons, said Jesus.

So how do you think this story will end?

Jesus told two other parables before he got to this one. Jesus had been accused of welcoming the wrong kind of people to his table.

In reply to his critics he said, a shepherd had 100 sheep. One got lost. The shepherd left the 99 and searched until the lost sheep was found. The shepherd was so happy he threw a big party. My, how he must have loved that one sheep. That's "extravagant" love. But notice the whole number: 100. When one is missing the whole is broken.

Then comes the second parable.

A woman had 10 coins. One came up missing. She searched until she found it. She was so happy she threw a big party. My, how she must have loved that one coin. That's "extravagant" love. But notice the whole number: 10. When one is missing the whole is broken.

The shepherd and woman could represent God's endless longing for us. Or they could represent our own longing to make the whole world whole.

Why do you include the wrong kind of people at your table?

Levine points out how easy it is to return a sheep to the fold and a coin to a purse. What's not so easy is to return an angry child to the fold. It's not easy to make a family whole again because people are not sheep or coins. We can't be picked up and put down where we belong. We respond not to force but to invitation.

And so the father stands for our longing for universal kinship, a longing to be one family with all the peoples of the world, not to mention to be at one with the earth and all her creatures. But, love, even prodigal love, is not enough.

Without question the father in the parable was affectionate, even extravagant with his love. As Levine points out, the younger son never really changed. He was still playing his father all the time.

I know how to get his sympathy. Here's what I'll do.

This father loved his son too much to refuse his entreaty. *Please take me back.* The father did and then invited everyone to a big party—everyone except the elder son. It was a big mistake—the kind of mistake we make all the time by playing favorites.

Love is all you need, we say. I say it all the time. But love is not enough. Love and affection can't help but play favorites. So we need something else. We also need to practice justice.

And wouldn't you know it, the parables in the next chapter that follow this one are about justice, not love.

And that brings us to the other lesson for today in *two* Corinthians.

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us in Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 15:16-21)

Reconciliation is bloody hard work.

Yes, the work of reconciliation begins with love and compassion. But it can't end there.

What does this work require?

We must love kindness, seek justice and walk humbly as we work, pray and sing that all may be one. Gentile and Jew. Muslim and Christian. Woman and man. Rich and poor. White and brown. Citizen and immigrant. All one in the Beloved Community where not only love, but justice, prevails.

It takes wisdom, compassion and justice to make the whole world whole.