



Sunday, March 30, 2025
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
“The Lament of the Responsible Son”
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

Who are we in this parable? Where do we locate ourselves? Are we the younger son, selfish, ungrateful, wasteful, finally stumbling home in shame, then overwhelmed to find that even still, grace greets us there?

Are we the father, overly permissive, allowing our children to do whatever they want, letting them wander off as young adults, suffering through their absence, waiting patiently for them to return home – or at least to call?

Or are we the older son, having endured a lifetime of favoritism of the second-born, only to be left out of the party, finding out from field hands about his brother’s homecoming and being shut out of the celebration, only to then be reprimanded by his father for objecting to the way things played out?

Let’s take a look at three core issues in this story.

Problem #1: “Give me what’s mine.” The younger son demands his share of the inheritance. In Jewish culture this was never granted before the father’s death. To ask for this early died was tantamount to saying, “I wish you were dead.” Anyone who heard this story in Jesus’ time would have expected the son to be punished or even beaten for such impertinence.

Problem #2: “OK, I will.” The father agreed to it. Why? Perhaps, he thought, the son wanted to go off and start his own farm. To buy his own business. To purchase a franchise. To make something of himself; after all, he’s led a pampered life. Instead, the younger son travels to a distant country and blows it all living a wastefully extravagant life (the meaning of “prodigal”). Things are made worse by a famine, and he finds himself scrounging for food among the pigs, a job considered especially detestable in Jewish culture.

Problem #3: “Not yours, but mine.” The legal situation when the younger son returns is that his inheritance is gone. Nothing on the farm legally belongs to him. Instead, it all belongs to the oldest son. because he inherits everything when his father dies. So when the younger son returns and the father starts showering gifts on him, the older son is furious. “That’s my robe you’re putting on him! That’s my ring! Those are my sandals! And that’s my prized calf, the one I lovingly raised, showed at the local fair and won a blue ribbon for. Now you’re giving HIM all these things that are mine??”

Problem #4: “Uh-oh.” The father must have known the older son would react this way. Why else would he not have been informed of his brother’s return? Why else would he not have been told his prized calf was being slaughtered? The father left it for the servants to inform the older son about the party that was going on right under his own roof. Sounds like your typical family dynamics!

So who are we in this story? I can't speak for you, but I'm tempted to focus on the older son's anger because he's got good reason for it. To my ears, his outrage speaks more powerfully than the younger son's remorse.

Yes, the younger son does come to his senses when all the chips are down. There are many artworks depicting his moment of enlightenment (Leonardo; Durer). He resolves to seek his father's forgiveness, and finally falls into his arms confessing the sinfulness that he had rehearsed when he was among the swine.

But notice that the younger son never confesses what his sins were. He admits to unworthiness but not to the actions that made him unworthy, namely, the squandering of his father's hard-earned resources, and how those were spent.

The older son, on the other hand, is shockingly specific in his accusations. His outburst at the father reveals that all these years he's felt as if he's been treated like a slave yet never received the slightest show of respect and appreciation. Never once has he been given any kind of party.

It is for the older son to hurl at his father the confession that the younger son left hanging. "He devoured your property with prostitutes -- and yet you killed the fatted calf FOR HIM!"

It's easy enough to put ourselves in the place of the younger son. Who among us has not wandered, squandering the gifts we have been given? We sang about it in our opening hymn: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love." And who has not been grateful for the grace with which God receives us when we finally return to him -- just as we see here?

Yet, today I hear the more persuasive cry coming from the older son. Not self-righteous, not self-pitying, but a cry that demands justice. Justice for years of feeling oppressed by his father's slave driving. Justice for a lifetime of favoritism shown to the younger brother. Justice for his father's unheard-of willingness to go along the early granting of the inheritance. And justice for the way that the father handed the younger brother the farm when it rightfully belonged to him.

The oldest son was angry, and rightfully so. Yet no word acknowledging his pain was forthcoming from the father -- only judgment: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. You should know that."

Great theologians and compelling artists alike have suggested that that God, through the father, is asking the older son to come home as well, to let go of his anger, to return to the arms of his loving family. But really, given what we know about this family, was it ever that?

Instead, can we listen through the many voices today who are also crying out for justice? Perhaps this parable is inviting us not to locate ourselves in the story, but to place ourselves in the shadow of God's grace at the location of others, wherever they happen to be -- without judgment.

Now let's ask: Why is Jesus telling this story in the first place? The first two verses of today's reading give us our context: Tax collectors and sinners were mingling with Jesus and the Pharisees

and Scribes were grumbling about it: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

We are being called to welcome people where they are, not where we would like them to be. We are called to listen to their stories, to their indignation, to their outrage, to their cries for justice. For If we do, seeds of truth will sprout and together those voices will grow into the living vine that is Jesus Christ, in whom we all abide. Only then, picking up on our image of the fig tree from last week, can we bear fruit for the sake of the world.