

“A Man Had Two Sons”

“A man had two sons”¹ where have you heard that before? That is not a rhetorical question. I know it is early in the morning, but let’s wake up our sleepy brains and think for a moment. I will even give you a clue. We encounter stories with two sons multiple times in the Old Testament. Any ideas? How about if we narrow it to just the book of Genesis? Who were men that had two sons who did not get along with each other? [Listen for Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, and Ishmael and Isaac.] So as Jesus begins this parable by saying “A man had two sons” his listeners who have heard the Genesis stories numerous times will be thinking about these familiar stories and the familiar trope.

When we hear about two sons we know a few things. First of all, the older son is supposed to be favored. Second, we know that in those three stories it was the second born son who turns out to be the one whom God favors. This proves that human rules are not God’s rules. As God says to Samuel “the LORD does not see as mortals see.”² Thus we are set up for this story about a man with two sons.

The two sons in today’s parable are stereotypes. One seems selfish wanting his inheritance while he can enjoy it. The other is obedient and apparently devoted to his father. The selfish son, the one that tradition calls the prodigal, takes the money and runs away to a foreign country. It is a place where he is unknown, his family is unknown, and he can live without the shackles of heritage, name, and responsibility. There he can live it up on his inheritance without anyone chiding him for his lifestyle. Also, there is no one who will caution him that he is running through his money rather quickly. Indeed, the only friends he has are those that will disappear when the money runs out. But he does not think about that until it is all the money is gone, and he is left tending pigs.

The other brother, the superficially good brother, stays a home with his father. He works in the fields with the hired help. He is seemingly devoted to his father, his family, and his community. The envy he expresses when his brother returns tells us that he is just as devoted to his inheritance as the prodigal brother. He is just more patient about when he receives it. He is also jealous of his father’s love. Even when the father tells him “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” it appears that the older son is not appeased. We don’t really know because that is where the parable ends.

In the Old Testament cases the anger that is expressed by the older brother toward the younger brother might have been better directed at God or their father. It was these figures that failed the older sons. Even the trickster Jacob could not be totally at fault for deceiving their father into giving him Esau’s blessing. Isaac was blind but he had misgivings about who was at his bedside asking for the blessing. He could have asked others to confirm it was Esau instead of going ahead.

What seems different to me is that the father of the parable is not favoring one son over the other. He affirms the elder son’s place at his side. What he celebrates is the return of the son he lost. His parental love is not limited by the younger son’s

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

² 1 Samuel 16:7

foolishness. He has two sons and he loves them both. The older son can be happy that this is the case. He too may disappoint his father one day and his father's love will overlook his failure, too. He can be glad that he lives in a family that shows unconditional love. He can realize that all of his striving for his father's love was unnecessary. He did not have to earn the love that he already had. This realization could be life changing for him. Perhaps it will be. There are so many possible ways the parable could play out past the final line.

You and I are recipients of the same kind of unconditional love. Sadly, as much as we may wish it otherwise it will probably not come from our parents. Parenting is complicated. Parents are not only tasked to love their children, but to rear them to be good people, to be productive members of society, to care for themselves and others, to be trusted outside of the parents' view, to have lives that are "better" in some way than their parents'. The parents also have to care for their own parents, their partner, and themselves. There are many complex and sometimes conflicting burdens put on parents. It is hard to balance. It is a tough job. The love we receive from our parents is tempered by all of these responsibilities.

How we receive the same kind of love as exhibited by the father in the parable is what we church people call "Grace." This is not to say that the parable is an allegory and that the father stands in for God. The parable is much too nuanced for that. But the love the father exhibits is similar to the grace that God extends to each of us, and even to those whom we think do not deserve it. That may be the toughest thing about this love. We spend so much of our lives, or at least I have, trying to earn the love of our parents only to be disappointed. God, on the other hand, is not constrained by human limitation. Jesus teaches us that God does give unconditional love all the time no matter what we do.

Years ago I attended talk given by a monk. As an example of this love he imagined God gazing on each of the class members. He said, "God looks at you as says 'You are wonderful. I love you more than anything.'" He then looked at the next person and said, "God looks at you and says 'You are wonderful. I love you more than anything.'" So he went down the line. That is how God sees each of us.

To stop you from talking back in your head I want you to repeat after me. "God sees me just as I am and God says to me, "You are wonderful. I love you more than anything." Say it again. As you go through today and the rest of your life repeat this as often as you need to until you get it through your head and your heart that it is true. That does not give you license to live however you please. It gives you license to feel loved and to share that love with everyone you meet. Grace is God's unearned love for you and the recognition that God's unearned love extends to every person you meet even to people we think are not worthy. It is part of the reason that Jesus teaches us to love even our enemy, and our unworthy and prodigal siblings, and every single person on this earth. If God can love them then as people of God we can try to do so.

"A man had two sons" and he loved them to the moon and back. Rejoice that God loves each of us the same way whether we are prodigal or patient in our coveting of what is not ours. Rejoice that each of us, by the Grace of God alone, is loved just as we are. And that God will celebrate us extravagantly even prodigally when we make our way home.