

Luke 15-

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable:

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. ²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has

devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’
31Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

SERMON

The party’s inside and here we are standing on the porch with the older brother. Do we really even want to join the party with *him—the younger*— being the cause of celebration? When he asks for his inheritance ahead of time, the younger son in effect says to everyone in his life, “you’re dead to me”. Shame on feckless dad for whipping out the chequebook. Off the youngster goes, leaving family, friends, his faith community, and his home country behind.

We by-standers and preachers have made so much hay about the kid’s debauchery that we made the whole thing about the so-called Prodigal Son. **You might compose a title for this parable and I KNOW you’ll write one that fits much better than “Prodigal Son”—Try a few of them. Maybe you can let me know sometime what you come up with. The process might take you deeper into the parable and launch you into some questions the parable is designed to put to you.

Oh, there’s the wandering lad’s back, much worse for wear. Shameful.

Shameless- the chump of a father abandons all propriety and convention giving his younger son his inheritance in advance. Now he sees his wastrel progeny return. The details of father’s undignified running— not something respectable adults in his culture do—and embracing the boy churn up both feelings of joy and awkwardness and the clumsy reunion. The theologian Helmut Theileke calls this story the “Waiting Father”. I sort of like that one too, but it does make father seem more passive and less—I’ll just say it—- chump-y. Maybe it’s good the older child is spared the schmaltzy reunion.

Dad starts gushing on about killing a fatted calf, or as some like to say the 4 H prizewinner; likely one raised by the brother who stayed put and worked the

farm. Here's the clincher. Something I missed every time I read the parable—nobody even comes to tell this responsible one that his little brother has just stumbled back home. Thanks to the Working Preacher podcast for prompting us to look more closely at that little detail. The older brother hears the racket and goes to investigate.

*Of course, we'd celebrate because that brother— of **yours**, —the one we'd given up for dead is alive!*

So there we are...shifting from foot to foot there on the porch, roiling with resentment, and itching over the injustice and unfairness of it all. Just what are we supposed to do with such indiscriminate and lavish goodness...and what are we? chopped liver?

We're in good company, out on the veranda overhearing the musicians tune up and the bubbly bottles uncorked. Joining us are some of Jesus critics, who chafed against his spending so much time schmoozing with sinners. That criticism sets Jesus to telling stories in the first place. Professor Joy J Moore applauds Jesus for how he responds to his critics...no snark or cancelling...he offers compelling, if troubling, stories.

Jesus spins a yarn about a lost sheep...poor little thing, not that bright gets into danger, but yay...is found. That nice shiny coin is nowhere to be found. It's not like it wandered off by itself out of spite. It's just....no, wait it's found! What's not to like in these stories?

Then Jesus puts the screws to us. He says it himself. We'll trip up over much of what he says and does. Fun fact: the word scandal comes from a word that means to trip over. We, the on looker, stumble at least as much as the baddies in the stories do. We are scandalized that a father could be such a pushover. We're scandalized that Jesus would rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. We can hardly say, "Yes, I am my sister's keeper" when she's so reckless.

One of my favourite sleuths of parables is Father Robert Capon. He's so cheeky. And incisively insightful. At one point he says something needs to die— and it's

our compulsion to keep score and our penchant for deciding whom God should and should not favour. That's our dilemma as they strike up the band and start passing out the appetizers—

Here's where the parable, and come to think of it God's love starts working us over. The father takes exception to our talk about that "son of yours" and reframes it as—"that brother of yours". It's as if God plays favourites, and everyone is God's favourite. That's a lovely idea until you realize "everyone" takes in some distasteful, even nasty characters.

God finds us there stuck on the porch, torn between wanting to celebrate and wanting to be right. God finds us stumbling over an unjust, unfair world and loves us...hoping Divine steadfast love will draw us into God's raucous, bizarre, and joyous party.