

Prodigal or Lost?

The wonderful story I just read is usually called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. That's rather curious, because the two stories that precede it are the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, so one would think this would be the Lost Son. After all, Jesus is responding to the Pharisees and scribes who are grumbling that he eats with sinners, people whom they consider lost. Taken together, the three parables show how God diligently seeks out the lost, celebrates when the lost is found, and really celebrates when one who was given up for dead reappears. So why do we say the *prodigal* son?

I think that comes from the cultural importance we assign to money and to things. I've been discovering the origins of that obsession by reading early English novels – I've talked about Daniel Defoe – and early American religious history. One of the hallmarks of the Puritanism of the later English Reformation and much of our colonial history was its emphasis on material goods. The Puritans thought that one way to know whether or not one was destined for eternal life was how much success one had in this life. That idea still plays a role in our thinking whether we're aware of it or not. Doing well is equated with God's favor. It is explicitly preached in what's called the prosperity gospel that talks more about Old Testament stories of wealth like Abraham's than New Testament statements of Jesus like "Blessed are the poor."

With that kind of religious history it's easy to see why we focus on how prodigal the younger son was, how much he wasted in what the King James Bible calls "riotous living." Jesus is more interested in the repentance brought on by the son's hunger. The young man was willing to become one of his father's slaves just to get enough to eat. But the father would have none of that. He was absolutely thrilled when his son reappeared, greeting him with open arms and throwing a big party.

The story might end there. It doesn't. They *began* to celebrate, the text says, implying that there is more to come. Indeed, the older brother refused to step into the house when he found out what was going on. He stood outside and sulked like one of our Puritan ancestors whose heart was too small to forgive. God's heart isn't like that. God's heart is huge. God will forgive everyone who repents, including people we think don't deserve it. God is more interested in showing mercy than being bound by our limited notions of fairness.

Does it really make a difference that we say the Prodigal Son rather than the Lost Son? Absolutely. "Prodigal" reveals our cultural idolatry of money and goods that we must not waste. Prodigal is someone else, not me, because I'm thrifty and careful with what I have. "Lost" – well, that could describe any of us, anyone whose heart isn't as big as God's. The elder son was just as lost as the younger, maybe even more so because he didn't know it.

By focusing on how much the younger son wasted, we also miss what's at the heart of this story: reconciliation. That's why the reading from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians is paired with it. Paul is very clear that Christ has given to us the ministry of reconciliation. That means all of us. God is making his appeal through us to reconcile the world – a very tall order, to be sure, but remember that it's God's work, not ours. We are only acting as agents of God through the

power of the Holy Spirit. That's why our reply to everything we promise in the Baptismal Covenant is "I will, *with God's help.*"

If we can see ourselves as lost, then we can look up and see God running toward us with open arms. We can throw ourselves on God's mercy, not stand outside sulking and missing the big celebration. We can be so overcome by God's love that we can't help sharing it with others.

The prodigal son? That's not me. The *lost* son? Well, maybe there's hope for me yet.

[Lent 4: Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32.]