

4 Lent March 31, 2019
Christ and Grace Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
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The beautiful thing about a story is that it can take us places, open our eyes, change our perspective, and teach us gently. It can remind us who we are and from where we have come. Family stories that are told over and over again, often around the dinner table with family, help us know that we are not perfect, that we fall down and get back up, and that life is full of challenges, joys and sorrows. Each week we gather here as a family, share a meal around the table, and hear the story of our salvation. A story has the power to show us truth as it breaks our hearts and then heals them.

Today's gospel turns out to be a story like that. Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine notes that a Jewish audience hearing Jesus say, "There was a man with two sons," would immediately remember that Adam had two sons, Cain and Abel ... Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob ... Joseph had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. They'd also remember that it was the younger son who was always the hero. But in this story Jesus threw them a curveball. In this story, the younger son turned out to be the one who was irresponsible and self-indulgent.¹

Like the stories that are told about our own families, most of us have heard this Gospel story many times. Because this story is so familiar and because we already know what happens in the end, we might be tired of hearing it. But let's try something different this time. Let's take a minute to think about each character in this story, and notice which one we identify with. Over the years, each time we hear this story, we may find that we identify with different characters. Listen for what this story has to say to us today.

The younger son left home, and squandered all that he had been given. We don't know why he left home, Jesus does not tell us that. Maybe he was angry, or was being selfish, or was just young and foolish. Maybe he could not bear to stay one more day in a family where he felt he could never measure up to his perfect brother. Maybe some of us can relate to the younger son if we have ever run away from difficult relationships, or from church, or from responsibilities to work or family. If we have ever been lost, estranged from our family, seen as the black sheep, or have in some way disgraced our family by our behavior, then this story of a father and his two sons both breaks and heals our hearts.

The older son stayed home, was the perfect son, followed all the rules, and did exactly what was expected of him. He worked hard, and wanted to be acknowledged for it. Maybe he was just a little too sure of himself, or maybe he was jealous, resentful and hard hearted. Maybe some of us can relate to the older son if we have always done everything right in our life and followed all the rules, and we simply cannot understand why it's so hard for everyone else to do that. If we believe that life must be fair all the time, and that people should get what they deserve – or what's coming to them, then this story of a father and his two sons both breaks and heals our hearts.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, pp.50-51

The father loved both of his sons and would give them anything they asked for. He was generous and forgiving and wanted nothing more than for his family to be reconciled. Maybe some of us can relate to the father if we have ever waited for our own prodigal child to return home, or to come to himself or herself and reach some maturity. Perhaps nothing would bring us more joy than the reconciliation of children who have long wrestled in conflict. Perhaps all we long for is that they truly know how much we love them, even if we were not always the best parents; even if we unintentionally hurt them, enabled them, or made mistakes. If so, then this story of a father and his two sons both breaks and heals our hearts.

And let's not forget the minor characters in this story - the Pharisees and the scribes who grumble because Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. Maybe some of us can relate to them if we have ever been overlooked for a promotion, or not chosen for a part in the play, or didn't make the cut to be on the team; all we wanted was to be seen and included. Or maybe it was just last week when we grumbled because the person in front of us at the grocery store clearly had over 20 items in the cart when the sign says 15 items or less. If we have ever been the outcast on the margins, *or* have been the one who did the excluding, then this story of a father and his two sons both breaks and heals our hearts.

If we are the wandering child who figures out he's lost, God is waiting for us, hoping we will return, and is ready to welcome us and love us.

If we are the rule following, stay at home child who has no idea she's lost, God waits for us, hoping we will come to know that love is unlimited and grace is ours for the asking.

If we are the fathers (and mothers) who love our children so much that we might even make some mistakes, God is waiting to reassure us that we are more and more beginning to resemble God in our unconditional and extravagant love.

And if we are the Pharisees and scribes, God waits for us to see that Jesus has come to confront our black and white thinking, our self-righteousness and judgmental attitudes, and turn our assumptions about God's mercy upside down.

Because the truth of the story is that we are all sons and daughters, we are all children of God. And we are all lost in some way, whether we know it or not, until we come to ourselves and return to God and trust in God's love. That's what it means to be reconciled to God – to realize how far away from God we have traveled, and to return home to God.

No matter which character we are in this story, God loves us. God loves Pharisees, scribes, tax collectors, and sinners; children who run away, children who stay home and sulk, children who insist they do not need any love, and all the children we refuse to love.

It's a beautiful story because it is always about all of us all of the time. It's the same story and yet it is new each time we hear about how love is both the easiest and hardest thing we will ever do. But above all it's a story about our God whose heart is bursting with love; who longs so deeply for us to return that God not only waits for us, but runs to meet us, healing our broken hearts, and celebrating and rejoicing that we have finally come home. Amen.