

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32 Misleading Titles

The parable I just read from Luke chapter 15 is probably one of the most well-known parables of Jesus. It is listed under the title the Parable of the Prodigal Son in most Bibles and books containing Bible stories for children. It has been the subject of numerous paintings by famous artist including Rembrandt. I counted over twenty works of art so titled when I googled Prodigal Son. Most of them, but not all, were portrayals of the reunion scene with only two characters portrayed. In the Chapel of the Prodigal in Montreat you can see a beautiful fresco by Ben Long which also portrays this reunion scene. It is very poignant. You can mention this title and almost everyone will be able to give you the outline of the Biblical story. With this much recognition of the title, why do I want us to look at the parable under a different label? This parable actually has three characters in the story: the son who left, the son who stayed and the father of them both. In the NRSV edition that I used this morning, the parable title has been expanded to read "The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother." That is better, but it still leaves out the figure which connects the tapestry of the story: the father. A commentary I read said the parable should be titled "Two Sons and a Father". Parables are by definition stories which point to something beyond themselves. They illustrate a universal truth, and in the hands of the master storyteller Jesus, they usually contain a meaning which is radically different from that the audience expected to hear. Maybe something even we don't expect to hear. Since there are three characters in this story, I propose that each of them carries a portion of the teaching which Jesus sought to give to his audience. Something about each ones actions has some insight to give us. Although we usually don't consider this as part of the parable, I want us to examine the first few verses I read which tell us about the audience to whom Jesus was speaking. "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable:" The audience around Jesus was mixed, those easily recognized by all as sinners because of the identifying label and those who thought they were not. The verses omitted this morning are parables seemingly directed at the religious leaders who were grumbling about the indiscriminate welcome Jesus gave to "sinners." The first two parables recorded here are about people with limited resources seeking the lost and rejoicing when it is found. I am sure the Pharisees thought those teachings were Jesus explaining why he welcomed the tax collectors and sinners. They found this offensive because it was outside their understanding of God. Some elements of that welcoming the lost are also in the third parable we are looking at more closely today. But the items "lost" in the first two examples were lost through no fault of their own. What happens if the "lost" state was by choice? This is the ground today's parable seems to address. Jesus begins by saying, "There was a man who had two sons." Just by this beginning it is clear that there is something for us to learn here about three characters: the man and his two sons. The son who is named the prodigal is spoken of first. He goes to his father and asks for his share of his inheritance. The father agrees and divides the property between the two sons. The request and the agreement of the father would have been totally shocking to Jesus' audience. The request was an insult to the father as an inheritance was something received only at death, then and now. We would still consider this as very bad taste at the least. A few days after receiving his inheritance, evidently he

decides the home pastures are not green enough. So he goes off to a distant country. He has separated himself from his father and his older brother in every way possible. By his actions he no longer has any right to be there in that household. Not only does he go off, but when he gets to this distant country he squanders his property in dissolute living. The Greek describes this as recklessly scattering. Most translations give the impression of an immoral way of living, probably because of the later comment by the older brother. Technically the word prodigal means recklessly spendthrift or wasteful expenditures which doesn't necessarily correspond to immoral acts. However he spent his inheritance, this way of life led to the dire situation that he had nothing. When he began to be in need, he hired himself out to a local citizen of the country. Since the job he got was to feed pigs, we know that he was not employed in a Jewish household. For a Jewish man this indicates desperation. Not only had he hired himself out to work but the job of feeding pigs put him into contact with the unclean. He has sunk so low that he longed to be able to eat what he was feeding the pigs; but no one gave him anything. At this low point we are told that "he came to himself". The coming to himself is the realization that his father's hired hands were better fed than he was. He decides to go back home and ask to be treated as one of his father's hired hands. The story tells us that when he hit rock bottom as expressed by "I am dying of hunger", the younger son planned a speech to give to his father: "I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" This scenario as presented—the motivation for going home and apologizing looks consummately self-serving. He never considers the pain he has caused his father, he does not reflect on the bad choices he made in squandering his inheritance. This description gives us no sense of repentance over his actions, just regret in the result. In many ways, this approach doesn't seem that different from the self-serving attitude with which he went to his father and asked for his inheritance. He plans to return and apologize only after that becomes his only way out of his situation. We get no real sense that this young man has repented. But he does indeed head home. Yet before he gets there his father sees him. We don't know if the father has been looking for him, "but while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion;" The father is not remembering the younger son's actions which led to his leaving. Instead, "he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." This description of a father running to greet the returning son may not seem very strange to us. We recognize in it the impulse of the father to embrace one he thought was lost, to welcome the returning one. But a man who ran like this in Jesus' time would have been bringing shame upon himself. It would have been below his station; it would have been viewed as foolish. The father risks bringing shame upon himself in order to greet his son. This is the depth of his love—he is willing to do this before the son has offered his apology—the confession that what he had done was wrong. In fact, the father's summoning a robe—the best one—for him, as well as a ring and sandals and calling for a welcome home party to celebrate happens almost before the apology gets uttered. At this point, near the end of the parable, we finally meet the oldest son. This is the one who did not make the request to receive his inheritance but has stayed home. In fact, while the welcoming is going on, he has been in the field working. As his work is done and he is coming home, he finds a party in progress. The older son on discovering what is happening refuses to go into the celebration; he judges both his brother and his father harshly for their actions. "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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" The father does not reproach the older son for his attitude, but also reaches out to him. "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." When thinking about this story where do we place ourselves? Which son are we? Do we see ourselves in the image of the repentant son who is forgiven; or the image of the older son who has done all the right things and then judges his brother for his errors? Are we the one who makes the wrong decisions and then seeks forgiveness? Or are we the one who resents the one who is welcomed back home? That the father represents God is pretty clear. I think that when we read this story we find a very comforting message about God. When we look at this story we see that the Father's movement is toward both sons in love. This story is about how far God will go to find us. This story tells us that God's love is inclusive. The father's love included both sons; those grumbling Pharisees and scribes who thought they did everything right as well as the tax collectors and sinners. This is the story of a Prodigal God—one who recklessly runs out to greet and embrace. It is about the extravagant love shown by God in sending his son into the world, not to condemn it but that the world might be saved. This is the story of the God who gives lavishly and foolishly to all: the Prodigal God. Thanks be to God.