

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“When the waiting is over”

In Luke 15, we have one of the most familiar scripture stories in the Bible, so familiar that many of us unwittingly put our minds into daydreaming mode as soon as we recognize it. “Oh yeah,” we think. “I know that one.”



Let's have another look, just in case we may have missed something. This parable is one part of a trilogy – with sheep and coins and sons each taking a turn. Jesus, the master story teller, organizes it all in such a way that he deliberately raises the stakes with each parable. He moves from animals – 1 of 100; to coins – 1 of 10; to sons – 1 of 2 ... from possessions to expendable income to a child. And he does all this in response to the considerable "grumblings" of the scribes and Pharisees. They are beyond annoyed about Jesus' behaviour, with his open door policy, his open table fellowship. As they pretend to wonder, to care about who Jesus is, they denounce him with a rather scathing summary – “This man welcomes even the outcasts, and eats with prostitutes and sinners.” As they intend, Jesus overhears them. What will he do? How will he respond? Will the religious rulers and authorities finally shame him into keeping silent? Will he realize, at last, that his lifestyle is intolerable to them, and to God?

In response to their attack on his character, Jesus tells everyone present, including the teachers of the law and the pharisees, a story, a 3-part story.

Henri Nouwen, in his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* [Image, 1994] invites us to enter into this third parable, the one that begins, “there was a man who had two sons ...” As we watch the drama play out, between the younger son and the father, the younger and elder sons, and the elder son and the father, Nouwen invites us to consider with whom we identify. It's a good way to get inside Jesus' teaching, and perhaps we might read it over each day this week, taking on the perspective of each character – one each day. I imagine that most of us will recall times in our lives when we've acted like the younger son; other times, when we've been the father; and still others, the elder son.

I'll leave that with you ...

Have you ever wondered why Jesus would tell a story in response to the condemnatory remarks of the most learned in the faith? Surely, if he could question and debate with the rabbis and leaders of the synagogue when he was 12, he could have levelled his accusers with a well phrased, hard hitting theological treatise. Why a story?

It seems to me that Jesus was inviting them and us to consider more than just the issues at hand, to see a much larger picture. He was trying to open their eyes and hearts to realize that life is a journey, given by God, on which we are accompanied by God, through which we can come to know God and make our way back to God.

By talking about a parent with two sons, Jesus was describing each of us during those times of rebellion and selfishness – albeit perhaps using a bit of hyperbole or exaggeration to make his point. Consider the younger one. For all intents and purposes, the younger son acts as though he wishes his father was dead. Selfishly, he wants his share of his inheritance, now. The father obliges and in short order, the younger son wastes it, squanders it – and not in ways of which the father would approve.

Jesus was also describing the tendency – or might it be stronger than that – in each of us to pass judgment on others, to view others and their conduct as less than acceptable or

appropriate; the readiness to denounce, criticize and condemn someone else for their mistakes, for their behaviour, for their actions; the predisposition to be jealous, resentful, embittered, unrelenting, unforgiving. Many critics of the church, both from within it and outside it, have suggested that the church and people in the church more often than not resemble the older brother. We have stayed the course. We have paid both the bills and our dues. We might have liked to have gone off and lived on the wild side for awhile, but we didn't do it. So, don't we deserve more of what we've worked so hard for, more than that ne'er-do-well "brother" who didn't hang around to help with any of the work of keeping a farm going and ensuring that there would be an inheritance, who only came home when he had nowhere else to go?

The *Interpreter's Bible*, in commenting on this parable and the likeness of the church [and us in the church] to the elder brother, muses: "If the younger son returning home had met his brother before he met his father, he might have turned right around and been thankful for the far country(!)"

Indeed, how often has a "hmpf" risen in our throat when we've observed someone getting more than we think they deserve – especially if we don't get what we think we deserve? I mean, when you think about it, the father really got carried away. Since he'd already given the younger brother his inheritance, he was probably spending some of the older brother's share to throw the stupid party. And it wasn't a simple "welcome home, son." No!! It was lavish and extravagant in the extreme. In those days, with no refrigeration, families commonly prepared just enough meat for the immediate meal. So, for 3 people, a couple of doves or pigeons would have sufficed, a lamb at the most. But an entire fatted calf would have been far too much. Clearly, the father has invited in the entire community. And the son, instead of being dressed in sackcloth and left to sit amongst the ashes [traditional sign of repentance], the son is outfitted with a ring and the best robe and sandals. He is swept along into the house he wondered if he'd ever be worthy of again, swept up in the arms and love of the father. Such indulgence, such leniency ... such grace, such mercy.

Jesus has been spending time with the outcasts and sinners, even sharing meals with them, and the religious leaders are indignant. Surely if he is the Messiah, he'd spend his time with those who deserve it, who have earned it by their faithfulness in the church. Feeling their disapproval and anger, hearing their words, Jesus tells a story whose meaning cannot be overlooked. Jesus shows the nature of God to be one of absolute forgiveness – undeserved, unearned, unmerited, grace-filled forgiveness. He shows that no one is outside of or beyond the love and longing heart of God.

When the younger son leaves home, regardless of what he's up to, the father waits, watches, longs for him to come home. And when the waiting is over, when that son is still a considerable distance away, and the father sees him coming – and there's a party – joy, wonder, extravagance. It's the theme of all three parables in this 15th chapter of Luke – that which was lost, and valued/treasured/cherished has been restored, so there is only joy and celebration.

There is something else in this story that always moves me. It's the picture - of the father, right at the end of the parable, standing outside the party, inviting, urging, waiting, watching, longing for the elder son to come into the party, to come home.

As I watch the older brother, and see myself in him, I realize that, according to this parable, the bottom line for the church and we churchy types is that we'd better emulate the father, we'd better be about the Father's business. When Jesus founded his church upon Peter, the rock, when he calls us to be his body now in and for the world, he calls us to live lives of

compassion and healing, of grace and forgiveness, of invitation and welcome. To this day, when we grow stiff necked and judgmental, he still stands outside the party, waiting, longing, aching for us to come in and feast. And, even as he welcomes and includes us, he calls us to invite, urge others, **all others** to come in as well – that none will be lost.