

In 2nd grade I got my first workbook. I devoured it: page after page of beautiful arithmetic problems! Marvelous! It all adds up: $1+1=2$, *every time*! Same for $3+4=7$, or whatever combination you choose. The answers comes out the same every time. It's all so orderly, predictable, clear and unambiguous.

Not at all like trying to keep up with Jesus. With Jesus, "answers" always keep shifting, like pieces in a kaleidoscope. Look at his parables. We may know the stories, but do they make sense?

Take this parable from Luke, a father who had two sons, for example. The father is scandalous. (Would the mother have been more sensible and respectable? Perhaps; but she's not in the story.) Shhh! We must be careful here. Don't let this story get out: a son asks father for his college fund. Goes off, disappears, wastes the money. Comes home broke and hungry. Father gives a party for the whole neighborhood to welcome him home! Maybe you don't want your children or grandchildren to hear this one! What kind of precedent is this? And coming from Jesus himself!

But, of course, the parable is not offered by Jesus as parenting advice. As always, context is everything. He Told the parable to two groups: tax collectors and sinners, who were "coming near to listen to him," and Pharisees and scribes, who were grumbling, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

There is one crowd, but two distinct groups; they are definitely *not* intermingled. The sinners are moving *toward* him, re-orienting their lives, becoming part of his circle of followers. The Pharisees and scribes are keeping their distance, holding fast to their convictions; with good reason.

Even today, eating with someone is choosing, valuing that person's company, even endorsing them, in a sense. This was even more true in first century Palestine. Jesus' behavior is incongruous for a prophet who speaks of and even for God. One might have imagined he didn't know who these people are, but he clearly did. How can a serious claim to religious authority be reconciled with his behavior? And does the parable help?

Can't help but notice this story revolves around property and worthiness—who deserves what. These are constant concerns in families and society as a whole. Has always been so. Jesus tells many parables speaks often about property and possessions, especially in Luke.

Not long before this, someone in the crowd asked Jesus a question about inheritance (also a factor here). "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Jesus declined to do so, and responded with sharp words about greed, and a parable about a rich man who stored up treasures for himself but was "not rich toward

God..” (12:13-21) Curious—Jesus doesn’t make a point about greed in today’s parable. Is the younger son welcomed home in today’s parable because he thought so *little* of his property that he squandered it?

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” the earlier teaching ends. (12:34) I’ve been thinking about the treasure and hearts of this morning’s father and his two sons. “Heart” in the Hebrew and Greek is not this (heart) but this (center, bowels, guts). The seat not only of emotions but of the whole inner life—thinking, feeling, intention, will; of moral life; of understanding. The center of one’s being and self.

Look at the younger son, out in the fields with the pigs—unclean animals—in a distant country. His his property, treasure, is scattered¹ strewn about, wasted, lost. So is his heart, his identity, his self. In a far off land, this Jewish boy is keeping the pigs (unclean) for a Gentile; coveting the pigs’ food. He could not be more alienated. He is utterly disoriented.

When he hits bottom, he “comes to himself.”: sees his situation clearly, knows the shame he has brought on himself and his family. Even before he picks up and heads for home, he changes direction, repents. He knows he is no longer worthy. Knows there’s no way he can make up for what he’s done. Will offer himself as his father’s hired hand. Though he may never be able to work off what he owes, it’s the least he can do to show his remorse.

Or, maybe he’s just cynical. Maybe his treasure is still himself alone, and that’s where his heart is. Realizes only his hunger and that no one here will give him anything. Maybe he goes back just for a roof over his head, and three squares a day. Ambiguous. Could read it either way.

Only the father is transparent here, unambiguous. He doesn’t seem to care about the son’s motivation. Runs out to him, while son is still far off. Surely he’s been watching and waiting for him. This father shows no sense of dignity, no pride, no proper sense of his authority as *pater familias*. What’s wrong with him? No wonder the son played him for a fool, to begin with.

What’s “wrong” with him is that he is “filled with compassion.” This is the Greek “guts-wrenched” word. His inward parts were wrenched. This is similar to the concept of the heart, the center of love and mercy. Whatever the *son’s* motivation for coming home, what motivates the father is mercy and steadfast love for his son.

He greets his son with a bear hug and a kiss. No scolding. No questions other parents would ask. (*Where* were you? *What* did you do with all that money? *Why*?) This fathers rewards his wayward son with the best robe, sandals, a ring, and what a

¹ The literal meaning of the Greek for “squandered” here; used of sowing seed

party! The fatted calf—fed on grain, not grass—fat and tender, fit for an honored guest. The father’s treasure is here, as is his heart, in this son.

The parable sings of forgiveness. But what will come in the morning? Will this son wake up tomorrow and live the life of one who has come home to his father?

It takes only one to forgive. It takes *two* to be reconciled.²

Like God, this father has reached out across alienation and estrangement, showering this son with grace. Like God, this father offers new creation: “this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” A new creation. A totally new point of view. Not the human way of exacting retribution; a most mysterious, puzzling way of embracing all comers, no matter how ragged or undeserving.

Tomorrow morning, will this son live out of the grace his father has lavished on him? Will he reach out to his big brother who so scorns him now—as he himself so recently scorned both father and brother? But I get ahead of myself . . .

Here stands the big brother, the elder son. So filled with bitterness and resentment he can’t see clearly. If he could, would see he is now in the very same position his kid brother was not so long ago. Not that *he’s* wasted *his* share of the property. Oh no, he’s held onto his share. Not that he’s run off. No, he’s stayed, slaving for his father, always obedient. He has no need of repentance. He is as justified by his conduct as that other son is—or ought to be—discredited by what he’s done. He has always done everything right; and what is happening now just doesn’t add up!

So, here he stands, as alienated and estranged from both father and brother as the younger brother he so resents.

Maybe both brothers ended up in their own painful places for the same reason: they never realized who their father really is and what they are to him, that his treasure and his heart are in them. This elder son does not think of himself as a son or even as a hired hand. “I am slaving for you,” he says. Looking in on the lavish party, is he only now conscious of a fuller, more joyful relationship with his father? Has he longed for this all his life without knowing it, been inwardly resentful all this time?

Or, maybe he’s right about his brother and his father. This welcome is fundamentally unjust. There has to be a cost for sinning against God and family. But the one who should be ostracized is welcomed and feted instead. This is dangerous. If this sort of thing is allowed, families and society itself will dissolve into chaos. Maybe the responsible elder son is right; maybe he has earned what he has and deserves even better: more recognition, a bigger reward than joining the celebration for his wayward brother. Maybe there has been no free gift for him like his brother’s.

² I am indebted for this insight from a commentary I once read but cannot now locate.

And yet, his father has come out to him just as he came out to his brother, to plead with him—to *comfort* him is another possible translation of the Greek. Even before this son realizes the depths of his own bitterness and resentment, his father knows how hard this is for him. He has compassion for him, just as for his brother.

Even after his son's very public refusal to join the party and his insults to the father's face, the father does not scold or demand an apology. The father reaches out across the alienation and estrangement: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

He is astonishingly gracious and generous. *Even if you won't come in; even if you won't acknowledge your own brother; even if you walk away from me, you are with me. All that is mine is yours; not just the inheritance, everything.*

This is not about dividing property any more. That was the sons' perspective, anyway: one asked, but both took. This is about grace: free, unearned and undeserved grace.

Here is a father whose resources are limitless, who does not hoard his treasure but offers it freely. How very strange. How unlike our own systems in which there is way more than enough for some and not enough for many.

How different from our human calculation in which $1+1$ must always equal 2. For this father, $1+1=1$. All that is mine is yours; we are one. New creation.

The question is, how long will this elder brother stand here on the threshold? How long will the father wait for him to come in to the party? The questions are the same concerning both sons; they are the same concerning everyone. Will the son receive grace or refuse it? Be moved by grace to repentance, or remain alienated and estranged?

Will we?

Will the elder son move toward or away from the party? Where *is* his treasure? Is it in the inheritance that he feels he has earned, and has set aside for himself? Or will he see his treasure is at the party, with his astonishing father whom he is just now coming to know? Will he come to celebrate not only his brother's new life, but also his own, and the new life of everyone at the party, all of them his brothers and sisters, if he can but see it?

Will they all go on to welcome even the hired hands into this new creation, so that $1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1 \dots$ without number $=1$?

Will we?

Now that's what I call the most beautiful arithmetic! Something to celebrate together for eternity!