

1) This tale Jesus tells has a three word title doesn't it? — THE PRODIGAL SON.

Titles matter—they help us keep track of stories we know:

(Jack and the Bean Stalk, The Gift of the Magi, Pride and Prejudice)

Titles give us hints as to what stories mean.

But titles can lock us into ways of hearing that shut down other hearings—
that keep us from understanding stories in a different way.

SO—let me propose three alternative titles for *The Prodigal Son*:

- *The Totally Dysfunctional Family*
- *Men Behaving Badly*
- (Or, if we can't bear to part with the operative word in the traditional title)
The Tale of Three Prodigious Prodigals

2) The Younger Son—A manipulating narcissist—

both before he leaves for the distant country, and after he returns.

(That's no apology he offers his dad—it's a crass pity plea.)

Off in the faraway country, he's a bad money manager—spending it, hand over fist—
setting nothing aside for Famine Protection Insurance.

PRODIGAL—profuse, lavish, wasteful—that's the Younger Son, all right.

3) The Father—A permissive parent.

Faced with an ill-considered request for an early payout of his will,

Dad could have—should have—"Just Said NO."

Instead, he enables his son's dysfunction.

When the boy comes slinking back, his bad behavior isn't punished—it's rewarded.

(After the party, will he go work on the family farm? UN-likely!)

Yet this father—so indulgent with his younger son—is over demanding of his elder one.

Son Number One raises reasonable objections to distributive justice seriously denied.

Ignoring these fair questions, his father tries to guilt him into coming to his brother's party.

And then there's the fatted calf. That's excessive! Why not veggie burgers?

PRODIGAL—profuse, lavish, wasteful of HIS resources—the father also fits the definition.

4) But the Older Son—is he a prodigal?

Well, he sure does run off at the mouth in a veritable profusion of angry words.

Bitterly complaining, he won't even name his relationship with his father or brother.

(As though, by ignoring those connections, he could just unmake them.)

Son One puts on his own pity party: *I've been your slave! Worked my fingers to the bone!*

He's mad because his dad didn't read his mind.

(Did he raise questions about to his long working hours? Did he ever ask for a party?)

Son Number One is a Prodigal also—a morally obsessive one.

Each prodigal spends his own resources wastefully.

Each ends up morally insolvent, bankrupt—
impoverished in the currency of moral responsibility.

5) And your point is, Jesus? The take away would seem to be:

Whatever your role in the family, don't try this at home!

No wonder folks try to help Jesus out by tacking on not only a title to the story, but a moral:

Repentance and Forgiveness—they solemnly declare

Penitents receive mercy and pardon.

Self-righteous do-gooders get admonition and rebuke.

To urge “the observance of a Holy Lent,” this sounds like the perfect poster parable.

But while sin is acknowledged in this short story by Jesus

nobody actually does repent, and no one really forgives.

That's also true in the two preceding stories Jesus tells about A Lost Sheep and A Lost Coin.

Neither sheep nor coin “repents” (How could they?)

And neither is “forgiven.” (Have you ever tried to absolve a sheep, pardon a coin?)

The only hint about what Jesus has up his story-telling sleeve is this:

Sheep and coin and son were lost—and then were found.

And each finding generates an outpouring of communal rejoicing.

6) Luke says that Jesus tells these stories to folks hell-bent on drawing sharp moral lines:

Good guys IN. Bad guys OUT. God loves good guys, loathes the bad.

NOT THAT SIMPLE, Jesus seems to say.

His very next parable concerns a dishonest financial manager—

a conniving crook whom Jesus commends because the guy's so clever.

In this parable trilogy, Luke's Jesus takes similar pains

to make a theological point using very questionable characters—

a sheep and a coin with no moral attributes whatsoever,

and a family where all are morally compromised, at best.

What is Jesus driving at? Maybe this:

Reconciliation and rejoicing don't necessarily or always come as “happily ever after's”
to moral transgressions that are humbly repented of, and graciously forgiven.

Reconciliation and rejoicing can find their way into the very thick of hopeless moral messes.

God practices reconciliation and rejoicing—

not just as a result of, or a reward for achieving moral rectitude.

God practices reconciliation and rejoicing as a liberating precondition for setting things right.

Perhaps that's why the father neither waits for an apology nor offers forgiveness—

but simply throws the little brat a party, and begs his big brother to come.

Maybe this father is making the best he can of a moral mess in which they're all entangled.

- 7) I once was asked to lead a workshop for a small group of pastors.
My contact person proved impossible to please.
His demands conflicted with my suggestions—they also conflicted with each other.
Nothing satisfied him—he was implacably oppositional.
Gritting my teeth, I resigned myself to professional doom—
the workshop was going to go really badly—somehow it went just fine
Afterward, my cantankerous contact person suggested we go for lunch.
Two possible purposes only for his invitation—to blast me, or to apologize.
He did neither—we just had lunch—talked, laughed—had a good time.
Our conflict never came up.
There was no repentance, no forgiveness; but there was reconciliation.
We didn't repress our disagreements, we transcended them.
Who took the lead? He did/I did/We did/Nobody did—it was sheer gift.
Reconciliation and rejoicing were critical as a means to setting things right.
And once we engaged in both, nothing needed to be set right.
- 8) Engaging one another like this is highly unusual, barely recognizable,
almost unintelligible in the world we normally inhabit.
But in God's mind, it makes good sense.
Because reconciliation and rejoicing are God's base line strategy—
God's *modus operandi* for dealing with human prodigality.
Confronting our wasted, misused resources with a radically different prodigality,
God continually, lavishly pours out costly, unrequited love.
God has a rejoicing party always primed to celebrate anyone open to reconciliation.
There is joy in the presence of the angels of God, says Jesus, over one sinner who repents.
- 9) To the church in Corinth,
a contentious, fractious bunch—a community giving him no end of grief—
to folks in serious need of repentance and forgiveness, Paul declares:
If anyone is in Christ, THERE is a NEW creation.
Everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new.
(For) God reconciled us to himself through Christ—
not counting our trespasses against us.
And God has given us the ministry of reconciliation.
Lent is a season of repentance and forgiveness, one in which we put festivities aside.
Repentance and forgiveness are important—fasting has its place.
Moral confrontation and challenge are sometimes absolutely necessary.
BUT all of these have value only insofar as they arise from, and extend the reach
of God's own joy-filled reconciliation party.