

Found only in the gospel of Luke, the parable of the prodigal son is one of the most beloved. It's a story about sin and a story about love.

There are two definitions of the word prodigal. The first is a way of living that is wasteful, self-centered, and destructive. The second is a way of living that is lavish, loving, and celebratory. One definition covers sin; the other love.

It's easy to identify sin in the younger son. Self-centered, self-assured, he demands what he feels is his due from his father and then rides off into the sunset for parts unknown. He runs through the cash as he pleasures himself and then he ends up in a pigsty. "Serves him right!" we think.

The older son, the good son, he's always followed the rules. He's angry when his deadbeat brother shows up at the door. He's furious when the festivities begin. All he sees is bad news being rewarded. WE think, "What about him? He's been good. He's getting a raw deal. It's not fair."

The father...now that's another matter. Can't he see that his hard-earned equity is about to be wasted? Can't he imagine what his other son must be thinking?

When the money is wasted, he takes the kid back again. This dad is really setting himself up for heartache. What an idiot.

Look at the wreckage of the parable of the prodigal son. Sin has pitted brother against brother, father against son. This sin is not just that of willful disobedience, but also of strained capitulation to cultural norms. It is not only sin of perceived wretched excess, but also of assumed expectations and corrupted relationships.

This is difficult stuff, I know. We'd rather hear about the "love." But like the elephant on the dining room table, sin cannot be ignored!

We are the younger son when we believe that we have control over our lives and our resources. We squander our creation, our gifts and talents, our money on those things that may bring us a moment of pleasure but cannot bring us life. We are the younger son when we believe that getting what is due to us is more important than stewardship of what we have, or that our place in this world is a

higher one than that of our brother or sister. The younger son's sin is characterized by strength, domination, and greed.

We are the elder son when we surrender our own needs—our very identities—to the needs of others. The elder son was 'the good boy' who did everything he perceived was required in order to hold on to his place at his father's table and earn the monetary reward he believed would give him security. His desire to please, to be needed, to do what was 'expected' of him kept him from defining his own self. This is the sin of low self-esteem, which if left unchecked has the potential of blossoming into co-dependence, or addiction, or abuse. The elder son's sin is characterized by his lack of courage to ask for what he needed or to dare to explore what might be self-fulfilling away from the unspoken expectations of family and society.

We are the father when we allow relationships to become competitive. As a coach's daughter, I'm aware of competition and the fact that a little of it can be energizing and challenging. However, relationships exist for the mutual benefit of those involved. Compromise is always required.

Certainly, we can assume favoritism in the decision to give to the younger son his share of the inheritance without offering the same to the elder. The reaction of the elder to the celebration of the prodigal's return betrays a lack of communication and clear expectations between father and son. The root of wrecked relationships become visible in a father's failing to create a healthy family, or by continuing in the unhealthiness of a family system.

So, where's the love?

The father serves as a portrait of Jesus' "Abba" who gives generously into our care all that has been created. The "Abba" withholds fine robes and rings and allows and watches us make our choices, even when it brings wrenching pain to the divine heart. This is the "Abba" who patiently waits for us to be open to the Holy Spirit, come to our senses, and return home.

Why did Jesus tell this parable?

The Pharisees were upset that he was eating with people they had labeled unclean. Tax collectors, prostitutes, they were to be shunned, not celebrated. Be careful the company you keep, Jesus. Your reputation is at risk. But, to Jesus, these were not “untouchables” or “deplorables”. They were people. People who were loved by God, just as the Pharisees were loved by God.

We too often assign value to people because of what they do, where they stand in society, or what they can do for us. We shun those who haven't followed the rules and find themselves in difficult circumstances.

It makes me wonder, which kind of prodigal are we? Is it the kind we want to be?

Presiding Bishop Curry's mantra is “If it's not about love, it's not about God.” We have ways to demonstrate the love of the prodigal father every day.

Acknowledge the person asking you for money. See them as beloved of God.

Pray for the residents going through Kairos weekends. Remember that had circumstances not been what they were for you, roles could be reversed.

Bring toiletries for Bethesda Cares and canned goods for Manna Food Center.

Being homeless and hungry aren't sins. They could be the result of one bad decision or a catastrophic illness or just not planning well for retirement. We've all been sick, lacked a good plan for something, or made a bad decision. They just didn't cost us as dearly as it has others.

Invite people you know to join you for services. Church has often been used to hurt people. Be open to hearing their stories and ask for their forgiveness. Let them know that church can be a place for healing and reconciliation.

Above all, give thanks for our prodigal God who spreads out arms of welcome to everyone and doesn't count the cost.