

Servant 1: I can't believe we had to kill the fatted calf for this.

Servant 2: What are you talking about? The Master's son was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and has been found. What better occasion could there be to celebrate than that?

Servant 1: Excuse me? *One* of the Master's sons got himself lost, then came crawling back here with his tail between his legs. There was one son who was right here where he was supposed to be all along. Years of loyal service he gave to his father, but can you even remember the Master giving him so much as a goat so that he could have a barbecue with his friends?

Servant 2: To be honest, I don't recall him ever having that many friends...

Servant 1: And no wonder. When would he have had time, what with working like a slave for his father all these years? It's pretty clear who inherited all the work ethic.

Servant 2: Funny you should mention inheritance. You know, it's not like he works that way totally from the goodness of his own heart, out of a sense of joyful service, because he loves his father so much. Be honest: he's building his own fortune. One day he'll get the lion's share of all of this [*gestures broadly*]. Is he really doing it for his father or is he doing it for himself?

Servant 1: That may be true, but what kind of son asks for his inheritance while his parents are still alive? That's like saying, "I can't wait until you die. Let's pretend you're already dead so I can enjoy the money you spent your whole life earning and saving." How greedy, how insensitive, how hateful can a person be?

Servant 2: Certainly not his finest hour, I'll give you that. Although if I were him, I wouldn't want to take my chances either. How fair do you really think his brother is going to be when that time comes and their father isn't around to referee? This was probably the only way he could be sure he would get anything close to his fair share.

Servant 1: Fair? There is nothing fair about this homecoming. He already spent everything that belonged to him doing Adonai knows what. Now he's at the table feasting, wearing the best robe and a ring and new pair of sandals. So he gets to blow a third of the family fortune and just start over like nothing happened?

Servant 2: Come on. You know the master. What did you think he was going to do? Didn't you see him standing at the gate, staring at the road, waiting for months, hoping that he would see his son again? All he wanted in the world was for him to come back. What was he going to do with him when he got here? Tell him "Tough luck, I told you so," and send him out to sleep in the barn? We're servants and we get better treatment than that. Do you really think he would abandon his own child, out of what, pride? I wouldn't be proud of that. He got what he wanted most—his son back. Why would the Master make him feel bad about coming home when that was what he hoped for all along?

Servant 1: But where is the justice? Those two sons were raised in the same household; that little ingrate had all the same opportunities to grow into a hardworking, loyal son like his older brother. Yet somehow he turned out to be so entitled; now that he's figured out he's not going to be punished, he'll probably go do the same thing all over again. What is the Master going to do then? Just keep welcoming him back? How many times is he supposed to do that? Seven? Seventy?

Servant 2: Wait a minute...You're not even mad at the kid, are you? You're mad at the Master!

Servant 1: So what if I am? Sure that son is irresponsible, immature, and self-centered. And it takes some kind of audacity to tell your father to go jump off a cliff and then expect him to take you back in when you've turned your life into hot mess. But you can't really blame him for trying—not when it worked! He probably knew all along that his father would forgive him. You can, however, blame his father for being foolish enough to take him back. Watch and see: that kid will never learn. If *I* were the Master, I wouldn't let him get away with that kind of disobedience.

Servant 2: Then I guess it's a good thing for all of us that *you* are *not* the Master.

The Lenten season of repentance calls us not just to feel sorry for our sins to but to change our lives in such a way that we turn from sin toward a fuller embodiment of God's vision for holy living. We are invited to do just what the younger son does in Luke's story: recognize that we've chosen the path that leads to pig poo and take a chance that if we return to our Father, we'll be welcomed back.

If God worked the way that we humans do, we would be taking a big chance in returning to the Lord. We're not very good at forgiving one another. We often mistake justice with retribution or vengeance. We fear that if we treat others with mercy, we will be inviting them to hurt us again, and we don't want to keep forgiving over and over. We see the limits of our own patience and grace, and we wonder if we're pushing too close to God's limit of love and mercy for us.

The good news is that God does not work the way that we do; God's thoughts are not our thoughts and God's ways are not our ways. There is no limit to the steadfast lovingkindness that God has promised to us. God will out-forgive the most gracious of us, every time. We can't wander far enough for God to give up on us. God has already forgiven us, even before we figure out that we need to repent.

Luke doesn't tell us the story of a prodigal son but a prodigal Father who lavishes forgiveness, mercy, patience, and love on his children, both on the one who came home with a broken heart and the one who couldn't see how hard his own heart had become. And so we give thanks to the God whom we can trust to treat us with that same mercy, to forgive us without counting how many chances we've been given, to always welcome us home.