

As an only child, I'm unable to fully appreciate today's gospel, but I've heard enough from others to surmise that the strife between siblings in this story is not unique. Even *The Crown*, the Netflix series about the British royal family, included an episode where the Queen re-examined her relationships with each of her children after hearing Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher matter-of-factly refer to one of her twins as her favorite, while that son was literally lost in the desert, having gone off-route in a cross-country motor race, triggering an international search and rescue mission. The episode concludes with a scene at the Thatchers' dinner table, where the father and daughter—the child who is very well aware that she is *not* her mother's favorite—exchange exasperated looks while the son, now home safe, downplays the efforts of his rescuers with astonishing entitlement before complaining to his mother, who is waiting on him hand and foot, that she forgot to pour gravy on his supper. Although the series is fictional, it presents even the Queen's and Prime Minister's families facing universally relatable issues, which may be the same reason this parable is so well-known and loved.

The lectionary skips some verses, but Jesus really tells three stories to the scribes and Pharisees who grumble that while they have lived exemplary lives, Jesus keeps hanging out with tax collectors and sinners. The missing verses include a shepherd leaving 99 sheep to find one lost lamb and a woman turning over her home to find one lost coin out of ten. In both of those cases, the one who does the finding is also the one who did the losing: the sheep may have strayed, but that's what sheep do; it's the shepherd's responsibility to keep the flock. Even if the sheep could be held partly responsible for wandering off, the coin certainly didn't lose itself. When the sheep and coin are found, their owners celebrate. Now we have a story about a lost son. This three part illustration is a common literary construct: as with little pigs or bears at Goldilocks' house, we expect the third example to be similar to the first two, yet with a twist. And when Jesus begins this story, *There was a man who had two sons...* his scripturally-literate audience of scribes and Pharisees would immediately remember that Adam had two sons: Abel was younger, but God preferred his sacrifice, so Cain killed him out of jealousy. Abraham had two sons: Isaac was younger and fulfilled the Covenant, while Ishmael was banished because of Sarah's jealousy. Then Isaac had two sons: Jacob, the younger, tricked Esau out of his birthright. In biblical families where a man has two sons there's sure to be baggage.

If you read this story in a study bible, it might be subtitled *The Prodigal Son*, though that's an addition to and comment on the text. *Prodigal* means lavish to the point of being wasteful, and that is a fair criticism of the younger son, who, Jesus says, *squanders* his property in dissolute living. But it would also be accurate to call the father prodigal, as he grants his son's foolish request *and continues* to lavish even more gifts on him when he returns. It has been suggested that by requesting his inheritance, the son is effectively saying he wishes the father were dead and therefore violates the commandment to honor his father and mother. Jewish scholars disagree; although it's not very nice or smart, the son hasn't sinned any more than a modern child would by asking for money for tuition or help with a down payment. That he asks at all suggests a history of indulgence on the part of his father. The son may not know better, but the older, wiser father is certainly foolish for giving his irresponsible son so much cash.

What we think happens next depends much more on our cultural background than on what Luke wrote. With our good ol' rugged individualism as a guiding ethic, American readers tend to blame the son's destitution on his wasteful spending. And to be fair, he didn't use his inheritance to invest in real estate or start a business. But students of this text who come from other parts of the world identify the severe famine as his downfall; still others point out the line, *despite his need, no one gave him anything* as the problem, because in many cultures care for the impoverished is the responsibility of the whole community. This was of course true for Jesus' audience, as the Old Testament is full of commands to care for the poor and especially for foreigners who, being far from home, would not have the support of their families as a safety net. Consistent with the lost sheep and the lost coin, the point of this story is probably not that the foolish or sinful son deserved to starve in a pig trough.

But just as the verdict is out on why exactly he hit bottom, there is also some disagreement on why he goes home. Reading this story in Lent, the season of repentance, we like to think that he saw the error of his ways, was truly sorry, and went home to ask for forgiveness and begin a reformed life. Was he sorry? Or was he just hungry? Is he really willing to rejoin the household as just a hired hand? Because he still refers to the old guy as his father. He might be making a heartfelt confession, or he might be rehearsing what he thinks his father will want to hear. The thing is, it doesn't matter. While he is still far off, his father, whom we imagine watching the road all that time, hoping for his return, runs out to meet him, interrupts his speech, dresses him as a member of the household, and throws a celebratory feast.

We love to stop the story here, especially if we've ever seen ourselves as the wayward son, sitting in the mud with the pigs. We go back to the father and are welcomed, restored, even celebrated. The hymn we'll sing in a minute stops here, with confession and reconciliation. But Jesus doesn't stop here; in this third story, he varies the theme. Whereas the shepherd found one sheep out of a hundred, and the woman found one coin out of ten, this father, who only had two sons to keep track of, manages to lose both of them. Because here is the older son, standing outside of the party *that nobody invited him to*.

The elder son is not exactly a sympathetic character. His claim that he's worked like a slave all his life would probably have come as a surprise to the actual slaves in the household. And his accusation that his brother spent the family fortune on prostitutes might say more about his own imagination than his brother's indiscretions. He believes he has earned his place in the family, while his brother has not, even though that's not the way families are supposed to work. Then again, we are not always very good at loving unconditionally, or at least we're not always very good at expressing that aspirational love. We can criticize the older brother for his holier-than-thou attitude, but we can also have compassion on him for spending his whole life thinking he had to work to deserve what was already his.

Since both sons are equally lost, the father seeks out both, to restore both of them to the household. When the older brother refers to *this son of yours*, his father responds *this brother of yours*, to remind him that, like it or not, there is a relationship between them. We want the father's forgiveness when *we* act like the younger son; but how often do we act like the older son when the second chance or helping hand is given to someone else, when someone else receives not even more than us, but just the bare minimum? May God soften our hearts so that we celebrate the restoration of others, just as God has and will always celebrate us.