

The prodigal son,
it is one of the best known parables of Jesus.
A simple Google search
brought up over 8.8 million entries.
The story is so well known
that the phrase “*prodigal son*”
has its own meaning.
As a figure of speech,
it represents the universal experience
of returning home.

Perhaps you identify with the prodigal son
or some other character in the story.
It is not uncommon to find ourselves
separated from the ones we love.
There is the desire for independence or
self-sufficiency.
Sometimes, a relationship is broken
before healing and reconciliation can happen.
Sometimes, we discover we left behind what matters
most to us.

There is no doubt
that the work of reconciliation
is some of the hardest work we do in our lives.
We know, usually from experience,
that there are no guarantees.

No guarantee we'll be welcome back,
no promise of forgiveness.
Our search for reconciliation is risky.
It requires a certain amount
of humility, vulnerability, and courage
– from everyone.

This is the power
behind the parable.
The parable makes a way for reconciliation,
even in the midst of humanity's brokenness.

The story Jesus tells, though,
is not only about us and our relationships.

Jesus tells this story
in response to the grumbling
of the Pharisees and the scribes.
They are upset because Jesus
is spending time with tax collectors and sinners.
We might also call these folks
the offenders or objectionables.
Tax collectors work for Rome;
they are agents of the oppressors.
And sinners, well, sinners are those folks
who were notorious in the community
(I'll let your imagination run wild).

Jesus is cavorting with the very people
who the Pharisees and scribes deem unwelcome;
and, they don't like it.

So Jesus tells them **three** stories.

First, he tells them the parable of the lost sheep.

There are a hundred sheep
and the shepherd loses one.
The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine
to search the wilderness for the lost one.
When the shepherd finds the lost one,
they return to the fold and have a great party.

It is an absurd story.
What shepherd would put the entire herd at risk
on behalf of one sheep?
And who throws a party for their sheep?

Then, there's the parable of the lost coin.

A woman has ten coins and one gets lost.
She searches her entire home
from top to bottom,
cleaning like a maniac to find her coin.
When she finds it,
she rushes out
showing off the lost coin and rejoicing.

This parable seems a bit more believable.
Personally,
I have searched the entire house
for some missing money.
And, when I found it, I did rejoice
and, at minimum,
rushed to share my joy with my husband.

There is one important difference
between these two parables and today's Gospel.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son
is about **human** relationships:
a father and his sons.

We may have animals we love;
we may cherish our money.
There is nothing,
though,
that compares with our human relationships.
The way we share our lives
with one another brings us great joy
and, sometimes, deep pain.

Jesus knows this;
He experiences the joys
and disappointments of relationships himself.
So, he responds to the Pharisees and scribes
with a story they can relate to their own lives.

Except,
the story isn't really about human relationships.

Like the parables that come before it,
The Prodigal Son is about our relationship with
God.

The parable tells us
some important things about God.
Mainly, that God's reality is different from ours.
The father in the parable
does more than accept the son's apology.
In fact, He welcomes the son home
before he can apologize.
And there is more than
"apology accepted and welcome home".
There is a great feast, rejoicing and jubilation.
There is the promise of life started over, new life.

The promise of the Gospel
is the opposite of what we experience
in our own world.
It is the promise of abundant life
that can never be lost.

The promise of God's kin_dom
is that reconciliation with God is not risky;
it's guaranteed.
In God's kin_dom,
we are always welcome home,
no matter what.
Imagine if this theology
is what mattered most in our lives.
If we believe that we are always beloved and chosen,
how does that change our relationships?

The parable also reveals
how God's love changes us.
The father says **twice**,
 "for this son of mine was dead
 and is alive again;
 he was lost and is found!"
By his return home,
the prodigal son receives new life.
This is an opportunity to try again,
to do things differently.
The same is true for us.
Every time we turn back,
we get a new start.
Imagine if this theology
is what mattered most in our lives.

If we believe that coming close to God's kin_dom
in Jesus
gives us new life,
how does that change our lives?

I like to imagine it this way.

Every Sunday we enter into this Cathedral.
Over the span of about an hour,
we listen to our family stories,
say our prayers, and share a meal.
At the end, we say "*see ya later*"
and head back into the world.
Then, throughout the week,
we have our moments that resemble the other
brother:
moments when we imagine dignity
is a limited commodity.
We lose our way.

Then, something remarkable happens:
we re-turn;
once again, we find ourselves drawn close to God's
kin_dom.
We listen to our family stories,
say our prayers, and share a meal.

I pray every Sunday that I leave here
transformed, if only a smidge.
I pray that as I re-commit myself to Christ's way,
I move a bit out of my human rut.
I pray that
when I come close to God's kin_dom here,
it makes an indelible mark on my life.

I know God meets us here.
Even if we enter like the Pharisees and scribes,
judging and banishing all those we deem unworthy.
Even if we enter with a heavy heart
carrying the weight of our oppression
or knowledge of our sinfulness.

We are relieved of those burdens,
even if only for a moment.
God reaches us down and raises us up,
welcoming us home.
By the ministry of Christ, we hear God say,
 “I am so glad you’re here.
 Come. Sit down. Rest.
 I have something to share with you.
 Tell me what’s on your mind
 and in your heart.
 Have something to eat and drink.
 It’s the best food and drink I can offer.
 Stay. Stay as long as you can.”

Surely this changes us...
Even if we are share in the other brothers
resentments,
God invites us to lean in, to come close.
 Come close to God’s kin_dom, God says, lean
 away from the world.
 Come close to one another, lean into this
 community gathered at this table.
 Come close to grace, mercy, and love; come
 close to joy and hope.

For the more we receive God's grace and mercy, we
become more graceful and merciful.

... the more we seek God's way
the closer we come to God's kingdom.

...the more we accept God's grace and mercy
we become

ministers of God's reconciling love.

And this is good news indeed; Thanks be to God!