

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

March 30, 2025

Reconciliation

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There's always something of a danger with these very familiar parables. We can remain a bit too complacent when it comes to exploring them. We think we know what these stories and narratives mean, so we don't do the same work to really wrestle with what God's word might be trying to communicate to us.

This particular parable is often referred to as the parable of the prodigal son. The familiar mode of interpreting this text focuses on the youngest son's actions. There is also some inherent comparison and judgement in this text; the younger son is wasteful while the elder son is not. The father is gracious and kind to both. That's it, the end.

Well, not so fast! There are some fascinating details here, and I think some interesting exploration of human motivations. First off, what does prodigal mean? Wastefully extravagant or lavishly generous. And, while the younger son lives prodigally, he is not the only prodigal one in this parable!

Do you recall what the father does as soon as he catches sight of his son returning home? "But while [the younger son] was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."¹ Then what does he do? He orders his slaves to "quickly, bring

¹ Luke 15:20b (NRSVUE)

out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate..."² It almost seems as though the prodigal son learned his ways from the prodigal father.

In a culture largely dominated by honor and shame, the father's actions are incomprehensible. The younger son brought shame to the family! He essentially told his father he wished he were dead, then flew off to Vegas to hit the casinos with his inheritance...okay, maybe not exactly that, but you get the idea! The appropriate response to this shameful son would be to run him off as soon as he got near home!

But the father is prodigal too! Only the father is prodigal with grace and love. The father is willing to lavish grace upon this wayward son, he's willing to welcome him back home into the family and restore him to relationship. From most points of view, this is a lavishly generous gesture...a prodigal one!

Then there's the elder son. When the younger son is welcomed back so prodigally, receiving a reception usually reserved for an honored guests, he takes issue with this welcome. The text tells us he was in the field working when he heard the sounds of celebration; his father didn't even send word out to him!

The older son goes on to describe himself as almost a slave in his obedience to his father. Both sons, it seems, had it in their minds that their father wanted servitude (remember what the younger son was planning on the walk home?). And if that was what they both thought the father wanted, then the elder son's anger is justified, is it not? He did what he was supposed to do. He always did what he was supposed to do! He filled his role well! He was the "good

² Luke 15:22b-23

son” rather than simply being who God made him to be. It goes to show how limiting labels can be, even self-applied ones.

Was what the father wanted servitude? I don’t see much in the text to suggest that. The father does have a fair bit of empathy though. He responds with grace and mercy to his younger son. Part of me wishes such compassion was extended to the older son too. But perhaps that is intentional, perhaps the elder son need confronting. After all, someone who has reduced himself to a label has likely done to same to others around him.

If, to the elder son, he is the “good” son and the younger one the “bad” son and father is Father, then things are simple...easy. The judgement is obvious, honor must be preserved. But the father rather consistently fails to live up to the labels and expectations is sons place on him. Instead he subverts them and tries to open up for us a deeper way of relating to one another.

The father is uninterested in honor/shame because he is centering relationship. The father insists on the elder son entering the celebration because he is centering reconciliation and community. The father, again and again, centers connection in this text. He wants connection with his younger son, even if it requires mercy and forgiveness. He wants connection with his elder son, emphasizing continued presence and relationship. He also wants his sons to be reconciled to each other too. Calling both brothers to see how their relationship, their connection, was dead but now has the possibility of resurrection!

Jesus is calling upon his followers to center community, connection, and reconciliation in this parable. The father is drawing both sons back into relationship with him, and with each other. Extending loving mercy to one, and loving challenge to the other. We need both at times, but mostly we need to be reminded that we are called to prioritize reconciliation and center connection! Amen.