

"There was a man who had two sons." What an intro! Already the family dynamics are laid bare: a man, son 1 and son 2. He doesn't say, "there was a man who was the father of two brothers." No, just a man and his two sons.

My heart already goes out to each of them. For instance, what must it have been like to be a parent of two kids who had no meaningful relationship to one another? (Some of us don't have to work very hard to imagine that dynamic. At some point in nearly every family with multiple children, this is the case.) When my kids aren't getting along, my heart rips in two ... or three, depending on what's going on at the moment.

When I was pregnant with my second child, I got worried about the possibility of favoring one kid over the other. I was consumed with love for my first child ... how would it work with another kid in the mix? Would I resent baby number 2 for taking my attention away from kid number 1? I know better now, of course, but at the time, I was really anxious about this.

My mother-in-law Martha, whom many of you know, said something that struck me as being impossible: she said very matter-of-factly, 'you'll love each one the most.' At the time, I found her to be utterly unhelpful ~ her math simply didn't add up. But as soon as my younger daughter was born, I discovered her words to be very true: each of my girls is my favorite. Each one stole my heart completely. **And 15 years after becoming a mom of multiple kids, I still love each one the most.**

My hunch is that the father in our parable knew that truth. He loves each of his sons the most, too. I recently read something that suggested that the parable is mis-named: it shouldn't be the Prodigal Son, but the Prodigal Father. (Prodigal meaning excessively extravagant.) And he is, because he can't help but be excessively extravagant with his love for his kids. Each of them has captured his heart.

The sons clearly don't understand the love a parent has for their kid, and unless or until they have kids of their own, they likely never will.

I wonder how was it for the boys as they grew up. What might their childhood and early adulthood have looked like?

The elder seemed to have been the kind of kid who walked the straight and narrow. The rule-follower. The one oriented toward 'being responsible,' knowing his duty and performing it to the best of his ability day in and day out. He may have found deep personal pride in his ability to stay out of trouble, having the approval of his father, and being well-suited for the work he was to inherit.

The younger ... well, not so much. It seems he was more free-spirited, more prone to following his impulses, not having any interest in following 'the plan' that was laid out for him.

Of course neither of those personality-orientations is wrong or in any way worse than the other ... they're just very different. But when personality differences are not understood or appreciated, it can lead to a lot of misunderstandings, resentment, jealousy, and hurt feelings. And that, of course, can lead to poor choices and acting out, especially among teenagers and young adults who can't yet see the bigger picture.

Based on his choices, my guess is that the younger of the sons was either the sort who felt he could never measure up, or who felt he 'couldn't do anything right.' He likely felt claustrophobic at home, like he was suffocating from the expectations he perceived others had have of him. Apparently, he thought he didn't need whatever his family of origin could offer him, so he chose to disown his family and go his own way.

It's clear that the father's heart broke.

We all know that whenever someone chooses to turn their back on you, it's hard. But when it's a family member, someone you care deeply for, someone who is 'supposed' to stick around for the long haul ... your beloved for whom you've show up and been there when things got hard ... being told in word or deed that "I don't need you," or "I don't want you" ... no wonder the father is heartbroken.

Was the older brother glad the ungrateful one left? Did he stick his fingers into his belt-loops and laugh, "don't let the door hit you on the way out!" Maybe he toured the remaining 2/3 of his father's estate (the part that would be left to him as the eldest), counting the heads of livestock, making a mental inventory of sorts, and felt really righteous, (and maybe even a bit smug) that his future, his place in the community, was secure and would now go unchallenged. He must have felt that he was living the dream.

The younger son, on the other hand, could now be free: free from obligation to uphold the family name, free from the expectation to take a prescribed place in the community, free from the responsibilities he had to bear that were assigned to him by his father ... free to choose his own way. And not to mention a healthy purse to fund him as he discovered what his way was going to be. Sure, he basically had to tell his father “you’re as good as dead to me. Go ahead and give me my 1/3 of your estate that would have been my inheritance because I don’t ever want anything else to do with you.” At that point in time, he was grateful to no longer be suffocating in that nightmare of a home. Yeah, he certainly thought he was now living the dream.

That is, until he woke up (and as Luke puts it) “came to himself.” He discovered, as so many do, that his unfettered freedom didn’t bring him the life he had imagined. He found himself shackled to despair brought about by ‘living his best life.’

That notion of freedom from responsibility versus strict adherence to one’s obligations is lived out by these two young men, and it doesn’t go well for either of them. Sole fidelity to duty (while venerated by society) works against bearing fruit: the reluctant action of duty can achieve some measure of success, but it does not cultivate life.¹ On the flip side, we see the younger son’s unbounded freedom leading to alienation and despair.

There is a third way that Jesus teaches and models again and again throughout the Gospels: one of communal responsibility marked by munificence and mutuality. Neither freedom from responsibility nor slavish obedience to expectations are life-giving, rather a natural movement of give and take, of offering and receiving are what fosters life and growth.

We all know that one person who is all ‘take-take-take.’ The movement of give/take in their relationships is all unilateral – working in only one direction. It’s exhausting for the giver and the taker seems never to be satiated. Likewise, we all know that other person who can only ‘give-give-give’ and never receive in return. Again, unilateral, imbalanced, non-mutual. Both are toxic.

The older son perceives himself as the ultimate giver, the premier sacrificer: “Listen!” he says. (Notice he doesn’t request his father’s attention, as the younger

¹ Adapted from a reflection by Cheryl Lindsay

son does, but rather demands it.) “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command...”

The younger son, on the other hand, acknowledges his own self-centered behavior, how he left in a way that blasphemed God and rejected his father by demanding what he was not yet entitled to. He begins his rehearsed apology with an acknowledgement of their relationship: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you...”

The father in our parable shows us that third way: he relates to both his sons in a way that is mutual, respectful, dynamic, and honest. He gives room for each to express themselves with whatever dignity they can muster, and honors each of them while maintaining his own integrity.

First, he interrupts his younger son’s apology and immediately calls for the proper robes and insignia of a child of his house, and declares that there will be a feast. In that moment the younger son realizes that he could have returned much sooner, as there was (certainly to his relief) no retaliation or retribution for his previous arrogance and shameful behavior ~ his father welcomed him home with open arms, restoring his place in the family.

The older brother comes back from the field and is angry about this reunion, and refuses to join the party.

I’m struck by the fact that (as Luke describes it) the father simply ‘comes outside’ to speak to his sulking older son, after having run to greet the younger son ‘while he was yet still far off.’ The older son confronts his father, demanding to know why this worthless “son of his yours” (he can’t even bring himself to say the word ‘brother’!) is being welcomed home.

The father even spells it out in those last verses: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this *brother* of your was dead and as come to life...” The father’s corrective of the older son is subtle, but it’s clear: ‘my beloved child, his return and this feast ~ none of this is about you. You’re still my favorite. And so is he.’

When we zoom out to understand this story in its larger context, we see that this is the third story Jesus tells the Pharisees when they are upset that he welcomes sinners and eats with them. The first two were the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin. Both stories elevate the value of the one that is missing because the remaining are incomplete without their presence; and both

stories call the listener to rejoice when that one is found, because the cosmic accounts are reconciled: restoration is complete.

God's math is amazing that way. Each of us are incomplete when all of us are not in right relationship with God and with one another. God desires that we all live in community marked by generosity of spirit and mutuality of care, in relationships that foster both the giving and receiving of care. As Paul describes in 1 Corinthians², when one part of the body is missing or impaired, the entire body suffers. Likewise, when there is repentance and healing, all of us benefit ... the entire created order moves closer toward ultimate restoration.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu³ once wrote, "A person is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, or walk, or speak, or behave as human beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human. I am because other people are."⁴

I called my mother-in-law the other day to tell her she was right. I'm 15 years into being a parent of multiple children. And I agree: parents love each of their kids the most. It's one more glimpse that we are blessed to get into the heart and mind of God *who loves each one of us the most*. Each of us is God's favorite.

According to Paul, we are called to serve as ambassadors of Christ. What might our world look like if we thought to ourselves, "you are God's favorite" every time we were in conversation with someone? How might that affect the way we communicate with one another? How might that affect the way we approach each day, the way we navigate through conflict, the way we listen and problem-solve and care for one another?

What might our interior life look like if any time someone shows care for us, we thought to ourselves, "God is telling me I am God's favorite through this person in this moment"? How might that shift our self-talk, our perspective during hard times, our motivation to give and receive love?

You ... **YOU** are God's favorite. And so is everybody else.

² 1 Cor 12:12-27

³ *The Book of Forgiving*

⁴ *Ubuntu*, a native word meaning 'I am what I am because of who we all are.'