

## Lent 4, Year C

For my entire adult life, I have identified The Prodigal Son as my favorite teaching of Jesus. I have often heard myself say that everything we need to know about the gospel is contained in this one story: that no matter how far astray we go in life, the father is always looking for us to appear on the horizon and is ready to forgive us, embrace us, and celebrate our return.

Powerful stuff. But as I have taught and preached on this story over the years, I have come to learn that some people, and therefore, probably, some of you, really don't like this story. And that those of you who don't like this story are people who see it from the perspective of the older brother, and who thus declare the father's behavior towards his two sons as unfair, lavishing a banquet on the wasteful son and seemingly taking for granted the faithfulness of the older son.

You see, in my family I am the youngest child and was certainly something of the rebel, so I easily identify with the Prodigal, but I now know that some of you were older children in your families identify more with the elder brother.

So how do we resolve the issue of fairness in this story? A few years ago I attended a lecture by Fred Borsch, the chair of Anglican studies at Lutheran Seminary, who spoke on the parables of Jesus, and he gave me a key to understanding this and other teachings of Jesus. He said that when the issue in a teaching of Jesus appears to be fairness, or money, or the law, replace the apparent issue with love and it will suddenly make sense and illuminate for us the depth of God's love for us. Example: The Parable of the Vineyard, where the people who worked the last hour of the day were paid the same amount as those who worked the entire day.

Now replace the issue of money with love. I have heard many parents talk about the fear they had when their 2<sup>nd</sup> child was on the way that they wouldn't love the 2<sup>nd</sup> child as much as they loved the 1<sup>st</sup>. But that, as soon as #2 arrived, that fear melted away and a love just as deep burst

forth for the 2<sup>nd</sup> child as it had for the 1<sup>st</sup>. It doesn't matter which kid showed up first, the parent loves them the same.

When applied to this story, perhaps we can reconcile those who identify with the older son and those who identify with the younger son by getting everyone to learn to identify more with the father. By identifying with the father we can see how he loved them both even though both son's drove him crazy at times.

And by identifying with the father we gain some insight as to how God can love every life he has made; the faithful and the rebellious, the resourceful and the wasteful, the trustworthy and the reliably unreliable. And everyone in between.

Our call is to receive that love when our need is to receive it, and to give that love when our need is to give it. Because in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the issue is not fairness, it is love, received and given. Amen