

I spent all of last week with my son, and we had such a good time. I can't imagine what it would be like to lose him. Jesus tells this famous story about a father who had two sons, and somehow loses them both. He first loses his younger son, and then gets him back. Then he loses his older son, and does he get him back? We don't know. Jesus never tells us, which I suppose is the point. The listener is meant to fill in the blank themselves.

Luke tells us that the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. The Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Yuck! Who would ever want to eat with a sinner? If you've ever had the experience of being the person no one else wants to eat with, then you know how painful that is. Apparently, Jesus has no problem eating with sinners, and the religious leaders didn't like it. Notice I said religious leaders because this isn't a Pharisee problem or a Jewish problem. The desire to remain separate from undesirable people is a human problem, one that has found a home in people of all faiths and in people of no faith. It's certainly found a home in the Christian faith, and Jesus tells this story to explain why it is he eats with sinners.

A man had two sons, and the younger son asks his father for his share of the inheritance now. That's an odd request, isn't it? Normally, when do you receive an inheritance? After someone dies. To ask for his inheritance before his father dies says something about what this son values. This week I was talking to someone who had cared for their dying parent for several years, and in his last days his father told him that he wanted him to inherit his home. Through his tears his son recounted saying to his dad, I don't want your property, dad. I just want you. Isn't that how it's supposed to be: to value relationships more than possessions? But this son wants his money now, and incredibly his father agrees to it. This would be complicated in any time, but in Jesus' world, estates were made of two things: land and livestock. To give his son an inheritance, this father would have to sell both, which would take time and make everyone in the community aware of what was happening in their family. I suspect it would be more than a little embarrassing.

After all the land and livestock are sold, the younger son takes his money and runs. And where does he go? Straight to Vegas where he blows it all on extravagant living. Now when the money runs out, the only work he can find is feeding pigs, which I'm guessing for a young Jewish boy was not a first choice of employment. Starving and humiliated, he decides to go home and ask to work for his father. After all, his workers get three square a day, and his father was strangely generous before. Maybe he will be again. So, he practices a mea culpa speech and heads home.

But while he was still a long way off, his father sees him and is moved with compassion. He runs to his son, hugs and kisses him, and before his son can get even the mea culpa out, his father tells the servants to get the boy the best robe. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet, and turn on the music because it's party time! This son of mine was dead and has come back to life! This is the part of the story that has resonated most with us over the years. Most of the art of this parable depicts this scene, and with good reason. There's a part of all of us that feels exiled from our own family, from our home, and from God. And all of us carry shame that

tells us that we are unworthy of love and belonging. The embrace of the father captures our imagination because we all want to be fully accepted, held and cherished, even when we are at our lowest. The grace of God promises this embrace is always available for us, no matter what we've done or what's been done to us. This promise is here for you today and all your tomorrows because God is so much better than we've dared imagine.

The lost son has been found, and now it's time to get this party started. Here's where we might expect the parable to end, but remember Jesus said this man had two sons. While we often focus on the younger son, the point of this parable has to do with the older son. While dad is busy reconciling with junior, the older son is dutifully working out in the fields. As he comes in, he hears the music and the dancing. Huh. If there's a party going on, why didn't anyone invite me? After asking a servant what's the buzz, he learns his little brother is back and dad's welcomed him home. The elder brother isn't as happy as dad, is he? He refuses to go in, and when his dad comes out to him, just as he came out to his younger brother, dad gets an earful. Look, he says. Look, old man, I've been slaving for you all these years and you haven't given me squat. But this punk comes home wreaking of cheap booze and women, and you throw him a parade! The older son feels overlooked, unappreciated, and it's time to let dad know how unfair it all is.

Just like there's a part of all of us who relates to the younger son, I think there's a part inside all of us that feels overlooked and unappreciated and resentful. Resentment is a tricky emotion that all of us feel. It can seem so justified. Whether it's in our families or the workplace, resentment feels like justice. We tell ourselves things like, "This is not about me. It's about what's right!" Anyone of you ever say something like that? I have. Over the years, I've said that to my boss, to my parents, and certainly to God. And it can feel so good to say it, to tell people with power all the ways they've let you down. Of course, resentment doesn't just play a role in our personal lives. Our public life is dripping with it.

Here's the problem with resentment. It makes us feel both powerful and righteous, but it disconnects us from what we want most, which is love and belonging. There's a new action/comedy movie on Netflix called, *The Adam Project* in which Ryan Reynolds goes back in time and meets his 12-year-old self. Their father had died a year earlier, and instead of feeling grief, Adam uses biting sarcasm to express anger over his father's death. In a vulnerable conversation, the 12-year-old Adam tells the 40-year-old Adam, "I think it's easier be angry than it is to be sad, and I guess when I get older, I forget that there's a difference." What if what comes out as resentment and anger is just sadness that we're too afraid to feel?

I don't know if there's a better expression of the grace of God than the father saying to his resentful son, "Child, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." Let those words sink in. What if those are God's words to you too? In all your anger over what's fair and unfair and all the times you felt overlooked, what if God was always with you showering you love and blessing? God has never withheld a one ounce of love for you, and never will, no matter how angry you get. And like the elder son, God invites you to come and enjoy the party.

The word prodigal is an adjective that means spending recklessly and extravagantly, and while tradition applies this word to the younger son, there is nothing more reckless and extravagant than the grace of God. God withholds grace from no one, neither the sinners nor the saints. God pours out grace on those who break every rule in the book and those who fastidiously keep them all. While that may seem unfair to us, God is gloriously unfair. That's why we sing about amazing grace and not amazing fairness. Without the prodigal grace of God, we'd all be lost, younger and older sons alike.

The parable ends before we find out if the older brother joins the party, which is Jesus' whole point. Remember Jesus directs this parable to those who wonder why he welcomes and eats with sinners. The prodigal grace of God welcomes all kinds of sinners, both the rule breakers and the rule keepers, even the self-righteous who are too afraid to feel sadness and instead opt for anger. Here's the good news. The invitation is open for all, the younger and the older, the sinners and the saints. Let go of your anger, because God is always with you, and everything God has is yours. So come and join the party.