

You are my hiding-place, O Lord; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother. Whether you've heard it a hundred times before or are hearing it today for the first time, you've no doubt seen yourself in one of the three characters depicted here, seen ways that this story parallels episodes in your own life. If you've heard the parable more than once, it's likely you've recognized yourself in each of the three at one time or another. Maybe there have been times for you when temptation prevailed over good judgment, or when your own stubborn resentment interfered with your happiness. Maybe there have been times when you've happily forgiven someone who has offended you. Certainly there have been times when *you* have been forgiven, even when you believed you didn't deserve it. Looking at these brothers and their father can be a revelation to us about our own lives.

First is the younger son, a free spirit, daring, adventurous, curious, impulsive—and maybe a bit fearless. He loves his father, but he is, after all, the younger son. Because he's not the firstborn, his inheritance will be much smaller than his brother's. According to Jewish law, when his father dies, he'll receive only a third of the estate. The family farm will never be his. There's really no reason for him to stay, so why stick around? But that's okay with him; he likes to live large, and he'll never be able to do that, he'll never be his own man—until he gets away.

We can see his point of view. He doesn't want someone telling him what to do or when to do it. But he doesn't think about the repercussions of his actions, about the cost of his lifestyle. He blows his inheritance, disregarding all the ways his father has provided for him. In fact, there's no concern for his father at all, until he runs out of money and has nothing, not even the comfort of his father's love. Jesus tells us how hard it was for this son to come home and face his father. His experience made him humble, helped him understand the mess he had made of his life and to take ownership of his mistakes.

Then there's the father—the parent of two children who are very different, as children in the same family often are. If you've ever been let down by someone in your life you can imagine the hurt and sorrow of his disappointment, especially if that someone was your child. And if someone you love left you behind but later returned, you know the joy of reunion.

And finally, there is the older brother. Perhaps the expectation of his inheritance has made him who he is; obligation seems to be the driving force in his life. He's definitely not a rule-breaker like his younger brother; no, he's a rule-keeper, and he prides himself on always doing the right thing. Maybe he expects to be rewarded for his faithfulness and obedience, but his motives are faulty. Being obedient won't bring him the recognition he desires, and it certainly doesn't bring him joy. He wants love, but he has made himself so rigid and unforgiving and critical that he can't see the love that has always been his. If he could see it, he might not think himself worthy of it and he probably wouldn't know how to accept it.

We can see his point of view as well, especially those of us who over our lifetimes have tried to live the right way. Many of us identify with this older brother. We believe in just desserts! But that's not what the gospel teaches us. The laborers who didn't show up for work until late in the afternoon were paid the same wage as the men who worked all day. The older brother is like the guys who got there early and resented the late workers. Yet he has *chosen* his path; no one made him submit to what he now calls "slavery." The Parable of the Prodigal reminds us that God loves us equally and abundantly, and that God's capacity for forgiveness is limitless, even when others think we don't deserve it.

There's more, of course, that we can learn from these brothers. From the younger we learn the power and joy of repentance in its simplest form. We so often think of repentance as a result of judgment and punishment, turning away from unhealthy behavior that separates us from God rather than as a way of turning to God. Here we see it not only as a turning away, but also as a returning to the one who loves us more than any other loves us. Surely the hardest part in all of this for the younger brother was admitting he had been wrong. Admitting our wrongdoing to someone other than ourselves is an essential piece of repentance. The younger son's confession of sin against his father and against heaven was a sign that he was truly sorry. Imagine how different that scene would have been if the son hadn't acknowledged that what he did was wrong and hurtful to his father!

As for the older son, his part of the story is unfinished. Is penitence and repentance appropriate for him, as well? It seems so to me, but I'll let you ponder that question. I invite you to wonder about what happened next, about what happened to the father and both sons after the party was over and they resumed their lives together. Were they able to live together in peace, harmony and love? What we don't learn about in this parable without an ending is the work of reconciliation, of learning how to be in relationship with each other once again. But the missing ending does not negate the power of love and forgiveness.

The Bishop of Arkansas tells a story about a man whose tea-totaling grandmother was coming to visit him in his old log cabin home in Virginia. The man liked to have a drink from time to time and he knew from his upbringing that his grandmother would wholeheartedly disapprove of that practice. He also knew that while he was at work she would be checking out his place to find out what was going on in his life and she surely wouldn't miss much. His dilemma was what to do with the bottles.

His cabin had attic access through a hole in the ceiling. A strong, normal sized person could stand on a chair and put things through the hole, then pull himself up into the attic to arrange what he'd put there. So that's what the man did, hiding the liquor in the attic behind some boxes where it wouldn't be seen. His grandmother arrived, spent the night, and the next day he went to work, confident that his guilty pleasure wouldn't be discovered. She was a short little woman and surely she wouldn't go to the trouble to get up into the attic.

Oh, but he was wrong! When he returned home in the afternoon, his grandmother very calmly said, "I found your alcohol." He was astounded, thinking of what she had to do to get up into the attic. He was even more astounded that she didn't say another word about it. Both of them knew she didn't approve, but she loved him anyway, despite the fact that his life choices were different from her own.

Like that grandmother, God knows what is going on in our lives and God loves us anyway. The Parable of the Prodigal says not one word about the returning son being scolded and reprimanded by his father. It tells us instead how much the father loved the son and how willingly he welcomed the son home.

"Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away!"
Amen and amen.