
The Prodigal Family and Forgiveness

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
The Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year C**

Let's begin with a survey. Show of hands: Who is an eldest child? Youngest? Somewhere in the middle? Who is a parent, or has taken on a parent-like role for someone? How many of you have parents, whether living or deceased?

It's part of the genius of Jesus' parables that he uses ordinary things, like bread, seeds, and coins, to say extraordinary things. And what's more ordinary than a family? We all have one, after all!

If asked what this parable is about, "family" may not be your first response. Given its common title, you might say that it's about the prodigal son, of course! Or it is about Christian principles of forgiveness and reconciliation. Or it is about God's grace, or about being lost and then found by that grace.

After all, this parable is the third in a series about losing and finding. Suppose, Jesus says, first, that one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one. The shepherd would leave the ninety-nine behind to find it, restore it to the fold, and call friends to celebrate. All is well! Or suppose there is a woman who has ten coins and loses one. She would turn her house upside down to find it and throw a big party when she does. All is well, again! So it is in heaven, Jesus explains, with rejoicing over one sinner who repents.

Then he begins the third parable, "There was a man who had two sons." Given the other two parables, we may assume that we are still in the realm of supposition—of theory or allegory. In that, the welcoming father represents our gracious God. The younger son, who took his inheritance early, ran off, squandered it on dissolute living, and then returned home: he represents lost and found and repentant souls. He represents those who know they depend on grace. And then there's the elder son, the dutiful son, who never left home, who has been caring and working for his family. He represents those who begrudge others that grace. With his dutifulness and obedience, he evokes those self-righteous or works-righteous legalists who refuse to include or forgive. *He* is the problem. The negative example. Don't be like him!

However, when you hear the parable as a family story instead, you might find yourself saying, *Ouch!* You might find yourself empathizing with the elder son, rather than blaming him.

It's not fair, you may object, to assume that the elder son's responsibility and obedience and anger stem from legalism or works-righteousness. Yes, he has a strong sense of duty and loyalty. Yes, he works hard for his father and family. But aren't those good things? Aren't we supposed to honor our mother and father? Obedience is one of the ways we show respect! Duty is one of the ways we express love, and gratitude!

But then, why is the elder son so frustrated? So angry? Well, he tells us, doesn't he? Because he feels unseen. Taken for granted. By his father. "I've been with you all this time," he tells his father, "but you have never celebrated me like this!" he says. His father answers, stating the obvious, "Son, you're always with me. All that I have is yours." But that doesn't mean that the dutiful son, the caregiving son, the son who is always there, doesn't long to be celebrated also. That he doesn't also need to hear, from his father, "Son, I love you! And I am SO glad you are here, you are home!"

But there's another, obvious reason for his anger. Remember his younger brother? The one who abandoned him, broke his and his father's hearts, and trashed his inheritance? The consequences of his actions don't just disappear because he got hungry, came home, and *said* he's sorry.

Of course, the younger son's repentance may be real. But we don't know yet. All we know is that he planned what he would say to his father, and then went home and said it. The elder son has no idea yet what his brother's motivation is, or what he'll do next. It makes sense that he needs time. It makes sense that he is cautious and slow to forgive.

We also don't know what the father or his eldest son will do next. The story ends with the two of them standing outside the party. Perhaps the father realizes that he has lost two sons—one to a distant country, and one here at home. Perhaps he recognizes that all is not well, not yet. That forgiveness and reconciliation will take time, and more than one person. More than one party. Perhaps he sees that this family's pain is shared, and so their healing must be shared, too.

Isn't that the truth? And isn't that why this parable follows the other two? Not to make the same point about repentance and restoration again, but to complicate that point. To move it from the principle to the personal. As New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine says, "It is much harder to recover a child than a coin or a sheep."^[i] It is much harder to recover from the ways we hurt, or are hurt by, the people we love.

In fact, sometimes, we can't. At least, not on our own, or not on the desired timetable. Sometimes, there is no principle or process, no amount of determination, by which we can get ourselves or others to forgiveness or reconciliation. But there *is* Jesus Christ, in whom we are reconciled—and are being reconciled—with God and one another. This parable tells the truth about the importance *and* the difficulty of forgiveness *and* the possibility of forgiveness.

To comprehend that truth is to understand and have compassion on the elder son. Compassion, or empathy, is not indulgence, or rationalization, or niceness, but, as Heinz Kohut says, a "disciplined understanding of the other."^[ii] And compassion is essential to the ministry of reconciliation, to the rebuilding of the web of relationships,^[iii] because people—wherever they are in that web—need to feel valued and understood before they can move toward accountability and healing.

So yes, in the wideness of God's mercy and justice, there is compassion for the elder son, and for us and others—when we have been hurt or betrayed or rejected and need that to be acknowledged. There is compassion for us, when we need to feel loved and safe again, before letting our defenses down.

There is compassion for the younger son, and us, when we have hurt someone, and we are facing difficult truths about our actions and their consequences and waiting and praying for forgiveness.

And there is compassion for the father, and us, when we have lost or failed someone important to us. There is compassion when people we love are fighting with each other, and it is breaking our hearts.

There is compassion for each member of this family, and of ours, when forgiveness or reconciliation takes time. And there is hope! Because there is Jesus Christ, in whom we are—and are being—reconciled with God and one another, and whose power of forgiveness is active even we can't yet give or receive it. Even when we can't control it. And so we persist in this patient and compassionate ministry of reconciliation, and in hope and in prayer... until one day, we discover that forgiveness has happened, by the grace of God.^[iv]

^[i] Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus* (HarperOne, 2014).

^[ii] Heinz Kohut, quoted in John Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible: A Pastoral Care Perspective* (Abingdon Press, 1985), 55.

^[iii] In *The Little Book of Restorative Justice for People in Prison*, Barbara Toews defines restorative justice as "rebuilding the web of relationships" (Good Books, 2006).

^[iv] John Patton presents "a point of view forgiveness is more *discovery* than the traditional understanding of it as attitude or act" (148). It is better understood, he says, "not as doing something but as discovering something" (176).