

ZE10090711 - 2010-09-07

Permalink: <http://zenit.org/article-30280?l=english>

A Love That Makes a Home for Both Sons

Biblical Reflection for 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, SEPT. 7, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel is often referred to as the "lost and found" collection of the New Testament. The chapter begins with the parable of lost sheep (1-7), followed by the parable of lost coin (8-10), reaching its crescendo in the masterpiece of the parable of prodigal son (11-32), at the heart of today's Gospel.

The word "prodigal" has two meanings: as an adjective it describes someone who is excessive, extravagant, immoderate and wasteful -- the opposite of "frugal." As a noun it is a synonym for the profligate, the spendthrift, the squanderer, the wastrel. It is easy to understand why this familiar and beloved story has been called the "parable of the prodigal son." The boy certainly squandered his father's money and was wasteful of his inheritance. But the story is about much more than a wayward boy.

We have played each of the roles

At different times in our lives, most of us have played each of the roles in this story: that of the doting, loving, apparently overindulgent parent; that of the younger son whose sinfulness and pride have brought them low, and desperately in need of mercy; the older son, who is responsible and above reproach, and who is upset at the generosity and leniency with which the weaknesses and sins of others are understood.

We are told that younger boy "squandered his property." The son has obviously gone to a pagan (Gentile) nation, since no self-respecting Jewish farmer would raise pigs -- non-kosher animals. The son apparently traveled a long way, imagining that he would find in some other country the happiness and excitement he had apparently not found in his own land -- and the result was just the opposite: He is reduced to slavery to foreigners, forced to tend to unclean animals, and ill-fed, so that he is slowly starving to death.

True repentance?

Although we often point to the prodigal son as the example of appropriate Christian repentance, the fact is that his motivations for returning home are less than noble. He is desperately hungry, and finally realizes the extreme degradation in which he is living -- a degradation that places him even below the household servants in the home of his father.

The young man is in misery not because of a sense of sin that might lead to repentance, but from his destitution. He came to realize how foolish he had been and so "came to his senses." That is a prelude to repentance, even if not repentance itself. The fact that he prepares and rehearses his speech in advance suggests a certain lack of sincerity; he continues to be only interested in himself and his own needs.

The father's disproportionate response

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In the story, the father has evidently never given up hope on his son, and has continued to scan the horizon for signs that he might return, and that they might once again be a family. The father's reaction to his son's return is an overflowing of love, compassion and tenderness: He "falls on his son's neck," hugging and kissing him, and demands that the symbols of his freedom and of his status within the family -- the best robe, sandals, the ring -- be restored to him, as if nothing had happened!

The father's response is on the level of human logic, entirely out of proportion to what the son deserves. The younger son has forfeited his right to expect anything from his father, and the father would have been well within his rights to turn the son away, on the basis of his deeply insulting actions, and the shame he had caused his family.

To see as God sees

The generous father of both sons welcomes back the youth who squandered his inheritance but does not repudiate the older son who protests the father's prodigality yet remains faithful to the father. "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (31). The restoration of the son who "was dead and has come to life," who "was lost and has been found" (32), does not invalidate the fidelity of the older son.

In this parable, Jesus overturns our expectations and categories and challenges us to see our relationships from a radically new and different perspective -- "to see as God sees." We must abandon the image -- all too common among people of religious faith -- of God as the heavenly accountant, poised to pounce on the slightest mistake. We must never forget the words of St. John Chrysostom: "All that God looks for from us is the slightest opening and he forgives a multitude of sins."

The older brother's reaction

The reaction of the elder son is one of righteous indignation: He has been the obedient, responsible one, staying at home to manage the farm and take care of their father after his younger brother's precipitous departure in search of adventure. And yet the elder brother's words quickly make it clear that, although he has done so, it has apparently not been out of any sense of love or generosity; instead, he feels that he has been imposed upon, has "slaved away" for years for his father without appropriate gestures of gratitude. The bitterness, coldness and spite with which the elder son addresses his father reveals a level of rudeness that is every bit as insulting as the earlier actions of his younger brother. He focuses, not on what he has been given, but on what he feels he has been deprived of. He suffers from the terrible disease of entitlement that has reached pandemic proportions in our day!

The elder brother is concrete in condemning his younger brother's behavior; telling his father how the younger brother has "devoured your money with prostitutes." How does the elder brother know this? Perhaps he simply imagines the worst about his brother, and describes him in the harshest possible terms. How easy it is, when we are angry with someone, to imagine the worst about them, to speculate about their faults and failings and magnify them to incredible proportions!

Lingering questions...

Does the elder son finally make peace with his brother and welcome him back? Does he find it in his heart to forgive, and to share in the father's rejoicing? Or does he find himself even more alienated than his younger brother had been? We are left with no answers, hoping for a conclusion that Jesus never provides. And yet perhaps that is the key: that each person must write the conclusion for him/herself, must decide whether they will respond with the type of love, mercy and compassion that Jesus' story evidently demands.

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We know what Jesus asks of us; the challenge, of course, is whether we are willing to accept that challenge and put it into practice in our own lives and relationships. We probably side with the younger brother only because we know the outcome of the parable ahead of time. In our heart of hearts, we grumble at love that makes a home for both sons.

Pope John Paul II, in his 1984 apostolic exhortation "Reconciliatio et Pœnitentia," wrote about this magnificent story: "The parable of the prodigal son is above all the story of the inexpressible love of a Father -- God -- who offers to his son when he comes back to him the gift of full reconciliation. [...] It therefore reminds us of the need for a profound transformation of hearts through the rediscovery of the Father's mercy and through victory over misunderstanding and over hostility among brothers and sisters."

The parable of "the prodigal son" or "the prodigal father" or the "indignant elder brother" can cause much grief for us, as we see ourselves and our motives exposed for what they really are. Let us not forget the parting words of Pope John Paul II at the closing Mass of World Youth Day 2002 in Toronto: "We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son."

Cardinal Newman and Christian repentance

Cardinal John Henry Newman's reflections on today's Gospel parable of the prodigal son are still relevant for us:

<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/parochial/volume3/sermon7.html>

"Repentance is a work carried on at diverse times, and but gradually and with many reverses perfected. Or rather, and without any change in the meaning of the word repentance, it is a work never complete, never entire -- unfinished both in its inherent imperfection, and on account of the fresh and fresh occasions that arise for exercising it. We are ever sinning; we must ever be renewing our sorrow and our purpose of obedience, repeating our confessions and our prayers for pardon. No need to look back to the first beginnings of our repentance, should we be able to trace these, as something solitary and peculiar in our religious course; we are ever but beginning; the most perfect Christian is to himself but a beginner, a penitent prodigal, who has squandered God's gifts, and comes to Him to be tried over again, not as a son, but as a hired servant.

"In this parable, then, we need not understand the description of the returning prodigal to imply that there is a state of disobedience and subsequent state of conversion definitely marked in the life of Christians generally. It describes the state of all Christians at all times, and is fulfilled more or less, according to circumstances, in this case or that; fulfilled in one way and measure at the beginning of our Christian course, and in another at the end."

[The readings for 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time are Exodus 32:7-1,13-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-32 or 15:1-10]

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