

**Image, Identity, and Inheritance
Lenten Series on the Prodigal Son
Luke 15: 11-32
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There is a wonderful ancient Jewish parable that goes something like this:

A young man applies to study with a rabbi. The rabbi rejects him, saying, "Before you can study with me, you must know Jewish logic."

"But I already know logic," protests the student, "I've been trained in all of the great philosophical traditions."

"That's not the same as Jewish logic," replies the rabbi, but the student persists, and so the rabbi offers to give him a test to determine whether he is prepared.

"Here is the question," says the rabbi. "Two men go down a chimney. At the bottom, one has a dirty face, one has a clean face. Which one washes?"

"That's easy," says the student, "the one with the dirty face."

"Wrong," says the rabbi. "The one with the clean face looks at the other one, sees a dirty face, and thinks his must also be dirty, and so the one with the clean face washes."

"I see," says the student. "It is a little more complicated than I thought, but I can do this. Please test me again."

"All right," sighs the rabbi. "Here is the question. Two men go down a chimney. At the bottom, one has a dirty face, one has a clean face. Which one washes?"

In surprise the student answers, "Just as you said, the one with the clean face washes."

"Wrong," says the rabbi. "The one with the dirty face observes his companion looking at him and making ready to wash his face.

'Ah ha,' he thinks. 'He must see a dirty face, and it's mine.' And so the one with the dirty face washes."

"It is even more complicated than I yet realized," says the student, "but now I do understand. Please test me once more."

"Just once more," says the rabbi. "Here is the question. Two men go down a chimney. At the bottom, one has a dirty face, one has a clean face. Which one washes?"

“Now I know the answer,” says the student. “The one with the dirty face washes, just as I thought in the beginning, but for a different reason.”

“Wrong,” says the rabbi. “If two men go down a chimney, how can only one have a dirty face? Go and study. When you know Jewish logic, come back.”

The same question three times with a different answer each time. I find this to be an extremely helpful, if not humorous, on-ramp to our deep dive into the parable of the Prodigal this Lent. To get into the frame of mind to hear this parable, we need to resist the desire to distill the complexity and richness of the story down to one singular meaning. We need to remain open to all of the possible points of connection this story offers. When we slap the label of a singular meaning on a story, it's easy to stop listening to it.

In her introduction to a book on Jesus' parables, New Testament professor Amy-Jill Levine suggests that “Reducing parables to a single meaning destroys their aesthetic as well as ethical potential.” She further offers that “We might be better off thinking less about what [parables] mean and more about what they can do.” And really, isn't this how stories work?

Think of the last memorable movie that you saw. Could you answer the question ‘What did it mean?’ It would be far easier to talk about what it did - how it challenged, provoked, comforted, stirred up longing, lifted your spirits.

And so it is with Jesus' parables. As we dive in, we do so knowing that the next time we visit these words there will still be more to find. Today, we're only looking at the first three verses and even in that tiny of a section, we will just be able to scratch the surface.

The first two parables in Luke 15 set up the third. The lost sheep and the lost coin are the soup and salad but with the father and two sons we arrive at the main course. A couple of features really draw this out. One is the sheer length of the parables. The first two take up a few verses each but the third spans verses 11-32. Secondly, we move from the search for one sheep out of 100, to 1 coin out of ten, and now there was a man who had two sons.

By beginning the parable this way, a whole world of other stories is evoked. Far from just providing information about the family structure, this first sentence is a literary device that to a Jewish audience in the 1st century would immediately call to mind the great stories of their tradition. It's like beginning a story with “Once upon a time” or “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” With just a single phrase, because of generations of shared and embodied memory, you can prime everyone's imagination as well as establish expectations for the story.

Cain and Abel were the sons of Adam. Ishmael and Isaac were the sons of Abraham. Esau and Jacob were the sons of Isaac. Manasseh and Ephraim were the sons of

Joseph. The list could go on and on but the point is that in all of these stories, the younger son is the one who either receives God's favor, inherits the covenantal promise of God, or receives the greater blessing from the father. In a story about two sons, in other words, you'll want to identify with the younger son.

But this is a parable of Jesus and does not do what we expect.

This younger son does not turn out to be like the heroic younger sons of Israel's history. Making his request to receive his share of the property that will belong to him before his father has actually died is at best an act of disrespect and at worst the equivalent of saying to his father that you are as good as dead to me. Instead of angrily denying the son's request, the second half of verse 12 simply states that he divided the property between them. (cue slide with text)

Notice that the word occurring three times in this passage in English is property and not inheritance. There is a word in the Greek language that could have been used to suggest inheritance. But that particular word for inheritance implies that one is committed to the family clan in terms of their standing in society as well as their financial security. The noun used in this parable translated as property, used nowhere else in the New Testament, refers more strictly to what the son stands to receive materially. The younger son wants all of the stuff without any of the ties to his family.

Even though this particular noun in Greek was just used on the lips of the younger son, the very next sentence uses a different word also translated into English as property. It's the Greek word *bios*, meaning life. The son asks for his share of the property and the father gives it to him. But to the father, it is so much more than just stuff. He is dividing the very life of his family. A few days pass, presumably so that the father can make arrangements to sell off property to hand over the liquid assets to the son. Perhaps he wonders, 'will he actually go through with this?' 'Will he actually leave?' He does and for what? He travels to a distant country and wastes it all in the blink of an eye.

I think the genius of this story, even from just the first three verses, is that it can be heard on so many levels. On the personal level, you and I, and maybe even that first audience listen and may see ourselves in the younger son, calling to mind the ways in which we have acted irresponsibly, wasting the gifts we have received in this life.

Perhaps we identify with the father, knowing too well the pain of a severed relationship with a child. But maybe Jesus is reaching back more broadly and telling the story of Israel using the themes of exile and return. I think you could also make the case that Jesus is reaching back to one of the first stories in the Hebrew Scriptures in the Garden of Eden where we learn that God made humanity, male and female, in the image of God. And to be made in the image of the triune God is to find our identity in relationships of mutual respect and love; with God, with neighbor, and the rest of creation.

In this parable each character's identity is bound in relation to each other as a father, a son, a brother. What the younger son does is nothing less than cut himself off from that which gave him his truest identity. Theologian Miroslav Volf says that the younger son's project was to "un-son" himself. He makes a total breach with the family. He gathered all he had and traveled to a distant land. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, he had everything he needed. But like that first story, the relationship that gave him his primary identity wasn't enough and he wanted a shortcut to what he thought would give him a greater life though his inheritance from his father would have been far greater.

This story that Jesus tells, itself echoing so many others, continues to play out all around us, even in you and me. We have been made in God's image, given an identity, and promised with the kingdom of God as our inheritance. Yet we continue to look for shortcuts that will bypass the need to be in life giving and transformative relationships. We continue to find ourselves in the exile of our sin, our violence, and our deception. But yet even in our rebellion, try as we might to shed our identities as God's children, God does not let go. Exile is not the end of the story. Amen.

Resources

Levine, Amy-Jill. Short Stories by Jesus: the Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi. Harper One, 2015.

"The Singular Answer." The Work of the People, www.theworkofthepeople.com/the-singular-answer.

Volf, Miroslav. Exclusion and Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation (Revised). Abingdon Press, 2002.