



## reLent: "reconcile"

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-35

Rev. Jenny M. McDevitt

March 31, 2019

As soon as I read, "There was a man who had two sons," some of you settled in to hear a favorite, old story. But I bet others of you heard those words and wished they, and the parable that follows, could be excised from the Bible.

In 1803, Thomas Jefferson began doing exactly that. With a razor blade, glue, and some blank pieces of paper, Jefferson whittled the Bible down to what he considered to be "the principles of a pure deism." In a letter to John Adams, he wrote: "In extracting the pure principles, we should have to strip off the artificial vestments in which they have been muffled ... We must dismiss the nonsense. We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, being selective even among them, paring off anything unintelligible or not easily understood. There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man."<sup>1</sup>

Now just for comparison's sake: our pew Bibles have 1,085 pages. Jefferson's final product had 46. And it wouldn't surprise me if the story of the prodigal son was not among them. After all, he set out to create the ultimate

"code of morals," and if there is anything to be said about this particular parable, it's that it is utterly amoral.<sup>2</sup>

Think about it: The son returns home not because he misses his family, but because he is starving to death. His father lavishly forgives him before he can even utter the apology he so carefully rehearsed. And the responsible older brother gains a reputation for being a selfish villain after getting bent out of shape over it all.

In other words, sin boldly, and we'll throw you a big party. No wonder some of us are frustrated with this story. It is amoral, and it is offensive — and it always has been.

Tertullian,<sup>3</sup> a theologian in the early church, insisted this parable must never apply to Christians. If it is, he feared, people of faith would use it to justify and forgive their own sin. "Who will fear to squander that which he has the power of afterwards recovering?" he asked. "Security from sin is likewise an appetite for it."<sup>4</sup>

Just a bit later there was Novatian, who declared that while God could forgive anything, the *church*, in response to significant

---

<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from *The Correspondence of Thomas Jefferson*, available in print or online at: [https://web.archive.org/web/20101214055234/http://cooperativeindividualism.org/jefferson\\_m\\_03.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20101214055234/http://cooperativeindividualism.org/jefferson_m_03.html)

<sup>2</sup> This observation comes from Barbara Brown Taylor, in a sermon from 1999.

<sup>3</sup> In the same sermon, Barbara Brown Taylor refers to all four of the early theologians mentioned here. I looked into their writings independently, but would not have known whose writings to consider without her guidance.

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *On Modesty*, excerpts from Chapter 9: "Certain General Principles of Parabolic Interpretation. These Applied to the Parables Now Under Consideration, Especially to that of the Prodigal Son." Available online: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0407.htm>

transgressions, should not welcome sinners back into the fold without a long and public period of humiliation. To invite a sinful person back into the Body of Christ, he reasoned, was to defile the whole body.

Their views were not universal, however. Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the 4th century, declared Novatian a heretic and wrote that to deny anyone — Christian or not — the hope of forgiveness was to make them wanderers and exiles on earth. Why should anyone ever repent of anything, he argued, if they knew they could never go home again?<sup>5</sup>

Gregory of Nazianzus a contemporary of Ambrose, countered plainly: “Do you not accept repentance?” he wrote. “Do you not shed a tear of mercy? I hope that you may not encounter such a judge as yourself!” He was especially offended by Novatian’s teaching that there was a hierarchy of sins, some of which were forgivable, others of which were not. “You sound as if you yourself were not made of flesh and blood,” Gregory said. “Come, stand here on our side, on the side of human beings.”<sup>6</sup>

I think Gregory was right, especially when it comes to this parable. How we understand it depends largely upon where — and with whom — we stand.

Those of us who have ever stood in front of someone we care about, guilty and shame-faced, knowing our words or actions wounded them, and then received words of forgiveness — those of us cling to this parable like a drowning person clings to a life vest.

On the other hand, those of us who have done every assignment, completed every chore, attended Sunday school each week, tended to aging parents, and brought allergen-free snacks to the kids’ soccer game — those of us who finished school on time and then undergraduate and masters degrees, those of us who show up

10 minutes early for every meeting, and who have Robert’s Rules of Order written upon their hearts — those of us tend to loathe this parable with unreserved emotion.

After all, Jesus keeps telling us how to live in obedience to God, so maybe there ought to be a reward for those who actually, you know, do it? Or at the very least, there shouldn’t be a party for those who don’t even try.

“There was a man who had two sons.” We call it the story of the prodigal son, but that’s the wrong title for a few different reasons.

First of all, the opening line tells us who the story is really about — a man who had two sons. A man who loved two sons.

Secondly, some dictionaries will tell you the modern day definition of prodigal refers to “one who leaves, and then eventually returns.” For most of my life, that’s how I understood it. However, the original, and still more proper, definition of prodigal is “one who is wastefully extravagant” or “one who has or gives something on an extraordinary and lavish scale.”

No one has yet approached me asking if I might like to offer revisions to the Bible, but if that were to happen, I’d suggest changing the name of this story from “The Prodigal Son” to “The Prodigal Family.” And not just when it comes to wealth.

Some scholars have suggested the father was in fact far too indulgent with the younger son, that it would have been more appropriate to tell his son to wait. There are some holy words in the Jewish tradition that advise, “One who writes a document bequeathing is property to his children in his lifetime is responsible for his own misfortune.” But like anything else that is lost — a sheep or a coin, a shoe or a sock, a job or a home, a relationship or a son — when something is lost, it is unscientifically proven that

---

<sup>5</sup> Ambrose, *Concerning Repentance (Book I)*. Available online: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/34061.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Christopher A. Hall, “Rejecting the Prodigal,” *The Christian Century*, October 26, 1998. Available online: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/october26/8tc073.html>

never in the history of the world have the words “I told you so” helped find what is lost.

The younger brother lives by grace. He has run through everything he has and determined his last resort is to home and beg his father to take him back. The older brother lives by obligation and obedience. He has put in the time and the sweat. He the rule follower who never once left his father’s side.

There is merit in both grace and obedience. We need both grace and obedience. And that is instructive. And so rather than attempt to discern the merits of the sons, perhaps we are better served by borrowing words from old Gregory of Nazianzus and pay attention to where the father is standing. After all, it’s his story.

When the younger son nears his home, every step feeling heavier than the last, rehearsing his apology over and over — his father sees him way off in the distance, not by accident, but because he was standing outside. He has been standing outside, scanning the horizon, looking for his lost son, every day since the boy left. And so he runs toward him, sweeping him up in love and gratitude, not caring where he has been or why he left because he’s home — he’s finally *home*. What once was lost has now been found.

The celebration and feast follows, and it’s worth noticing where the father stands here, too. Not in the center of the festivities. Not by the younger son’s side, where he can look him the eyes and reach out and take his hand. No, the father is standing outside once again, because his joy originated in having two sons back again, and he can’t help but notice that now the other has gone missing.

This time it is the older brother who becomes the prodigal, utterly awash in his sense of righteousness, morality, and fairness. “I did everything right,” he says to his father, “and you’ve given me nothing like what you have given your son tonight.”

“Your son.” Not only does the older brother refuse to join in the celebration, he distances himself even more, rejecting connection of any sort. And it is while standing outside, with the older son, that the father says, “Son, all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours — this brother of yours was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found.”

That’s where the parable ends. Do either of them go back to the party? We don’t know. I’d like to think so. Because more than either of his sons, the father is the ultimate prodigal, standing with both sons, meeting both sons where they are at, and loving both sons.

It is not enough for one to be at home, and one to be away, nor is it enough for one to be inside the party, and one to be outside. For all their differences, the father loves them both, and so says the same thing to them both: “Come,” he says. “Come and enjoy the feast to end all feasts.”

For the older brother to do this, he will have to make a choice — “a choice between being right and being in relationship.” And that is not nearly as easy that sentence makes it sound. But as this story wraps up, a wise preacher offers an important caveat: “Remember that the family crime in this story is not addiction, sexual, or physical abuse. It is undo forgiveness. It is undeserved love. That is what the older brother will condone if he walks through the door of that house — not his brother’s behavior but his father’s love. And he will have to make peace with utter amorality of love.”<sup>7</sup>

“Come,” the father says, “Come and enjoy the feast. Come and stand on our side, on the side of human beings.”

Last week at the end of worship we sang *There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy*. There’s a couple of verses that were originally written, but didn’t make it into the hymn version.

*But we make God’s love too narrow / by false limits of our own; / And we magnify God’s*

---

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Prodigal Father” in *The Preaching Life*.

*strictness / with a zeal he will not own. / Was there ever a kinder shepherd / half so gentle, half so sweet, / As the savior who would have us / come and gather at his feet.*<sup>8</sup>

“Come,” the father says, to the younger brother and the older brother, to the neighbors and the strangers, to the sinners and the saints.

“Come,” he says, just like the Resurrected and Risen One who will stand at this table<sup>9</sup> with us, spreading open his arms wide to say, “All that is mine is yours. So come and join the party. It won’t be the same without you.” For this feast — it is where any of us who are lost can be found, over and over and over again.

---

<sup>8</sup> The full text of the poem can be found here: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/yimcatholic/2016/05/theres-a-wideness-in-gods-mercy-a-few-words-for-wednesday.html>

<sup>9</sup> In this instance, “this table” refers to the communion table at MAPC, which was pointed to when the sermon was preached.