

We just heard the parable of the Prodigal Son. It's a story we're very familiar with but the word "prodigal" really isn't. It's a word not commonly used in our modern vocabulary so I asked around at work this week to see if people knew the definition of the word "prodigal." The responses I received were unanimously either "benchmark" or "standard;" as in someone who we should model ourselves after or look up to.

Their answers represent the way the majority of people use the word "prodigal." I've often heard someone who is perceived to be the favorite child in a family called the prodigal son or the prodigal daughter. But here's the thing. Sometimes words don't mean what we think they mean. The word "prodigal" doesn't really mean standard or benchmark. It actually means extravagantly wasteful. Now, with that definition in mind, let's look at which person in our story is the most prodigal – the younger son, the elder son, or the father.

You won't get any disagreement from me that the younger son is extravagantly wasteful. He goes to his father and demands his inheritance while his father is still alive. He basically says to his father, "You're dead to me!" He then goes off with his inheritance to a distant land and squanders it on a life of overindulgence. He wastes it all on a life of sin until he finally hits rock bottom when he finds himself hungry and envying the swine he tends. He envisions the full consequence of his sin is a permanent loss of sonship. He resigns himself to return home to beg his father to treat him as merely a hired hand. His sins became his identity. He no longer saw himself as son. He saw himself as sinner.

We can get a glimpse of ourselves in the younger son. In a very real sense, our stories can be similar to his. At our Baptism, we're given the gift of eternal life; which is our inheritance. But we can become rebellious and irresponsible. We can become soft of character and self-centered. Our wanderings, our unworthiness, our excesses can be in the forefront of our minds.

We can remain trapped in destructive, sinful patterns of living and squander our inheritance. Our sins can leave us isolated from God and from others, morally ruined. Our sins can become our identity.

You also won't get any disagreement from me that the elder son is extravagantly wasteful. He wastes the opportunity to learn from his father and be an example of forgiveness to others. He refuses to go inside and celebrate the return of his long lost brother. He becomes self-righteous because he has followed all the rules and served his father faithfully. He feels like he is owed more of his father's love than his brother. His attitude is one of anger, resentment, and bitter zeal. He's judgmental and unforgiving. His stubbornness and insensitivity makes him no better than his younger brother.

We meet elder sons quite often. And if we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that there's some of the elder son in all of us. We all have our times when we're judgmental and moralistic towards our brothers and sisters in Christ. Sometimes, we too can feel that people who repent shouldn't be able to come back so easily. They should have to suffer, agonize, and pay for what they've done. They should have to earn their return.

If you don't believe me, think about how you may feel in a few short weeks. We'll be celebrating Easter Sunday with Masses that are overflowing with people. We'll have people standing up at the back of the sanctuary and people sitting in folding chairs in the narthex. We'll see people we haven't seen since Christmas or even last Easter. And some of them might even have the audacity to sit in your pew.

I would argue that our Gospel story should be renamed the parable of the Prodigal Father because, to me, it's the father that's the most prodigal. He's extravagantly wasteful with his love for his two sons. Look at how he treats each of them.

The younger son comes to him and asks for his inheritance while he's still alive. Instead of responding with offended honor and banishing the son, he goes against the culture of the time. He divides everything between his two sons and gives the younger son his requested inheritance.

Then, when the younger son finally comes to his senses and makes the first move toward his father, the son doesn't even have to walk all the way home before his father receives him back into the family. The father saw his son from far off because he had been keeping watch, waiting and looking for his return. At the sight of his son, the father's heartfelt compassion covered the distance between them. The father runs, embraces, and kisses his son. The only thing the father cares about is that his lost son has returned. It's a picture of overwhelming love and reconciliation.

Then the father who ran toward one lost son now comes out after the other lost son. The father doesn't let insult deter him. He doesn't condemn or even criticize the elder son for his attitude any more than he does the younger son. He accepts him too and assures him that his faithfulness will be rewarded. He says, "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours." That's what the Kingdom of God is like. Both sons are welcome at the great celebration the father is hosting. There's room for both of them in the banquet hall.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus tells us this parable in today's Gospel to show us a lot about what God is like. Our Heavenly Father doesn't sit on some faraway throne disinterested in us. He's a wondrously generous, forgiving, understanding father who is always keeping watch for us and ready to receive us back into the family. He runs out to gather up errant sons or daughters in a forgiving embrace. His love knows no bounds.

Saint Paul says in our second reading, "Be reconciled to God." This Lent is an opportunity for just that - reconciliation with God and with the community. All we have to do is

take the first step toward him. If it's been a while since we've received the Sacrament of Reconciliation, that's ok. The self-righteous may hold our trespasses against us, but God doesn't. The self-righteous may want us to suffer, agonize, and pay for what we've done before we can be reconciled with the Father, but we don't have to. None of us do.

Whether we see ourselves as the younger son or the elder son, God's loving arms are open wide ready to embrace us because Someone has already suffered, been humiliated, agonized, and earned our return to the Father. By His holy cross, He has redeemed the world. By His wounds, we're healed. Because of Jesus Christ, we can come back home. God our Father will look at us and say, in effect, "Let us celebrate with a feast, because this son or daughter of mine was dead, and has come back to life again."