

The story ends exactly where it begins.

The father standing in the field pleading with the older son is exactly who Jesus is and what he is doing, trying to explain to the grumbling, self-righteous, judgmental Pharisees that his table fellowship with sinners is in fact the joy of heaven which is incomplete without them.

When he looks them in the eye and says, *His father came out and began to plead with him*, he is describing what is happening right then and there, for Jesus is the father out of the house, out in the field, pleading with his nearest and dearest to get over themselves and join him in welcoming the lost and found.

There is no tidy ending, of course, because the story is live, and the next line of it will be written not by Jesus but by the Pharisees, who must decide whether to trust the crazy old God they serve but struggle to understand, who must vote with their feet as much as did the desperate sinners who had the indignity to stumble into a preposterous welcome.

God loves these Pharisees, and while God honors and appreciates their loyalty and their hard work, what God really wants is their companionship and participation in the party. Will they drop their shovels and their attitudes and come inside?

Now, centuries later, the story is still live.

The father and the forgiven son are still waiting for an answer.

I can hardly preach with any credibility about the transaction between them because I come to this haunting gospel text always as the older brother, literally in my family as well as figuratively in Jesus' story.

I do not know the joy of homecoming and extreme forgiveness because I never had the compulsion or the courage to wander very far.

I do not know the wonder of finding a lost child because I've never been a parent.

But I do know only too well what it is to be a myopic Pharisee.

I know only too well what it is to be a bitter religious leader and do-gooder trapped in anger and resentment by a skewed sense of entitlement and propriety and self-righteousness.

I know what it is to work the Father's field but refuse to come in, to stand as an outsider in my own home and feel unwelcome in the joy it is my job to provide for others.

Only too often have I stood with the elder son and the Pharisees, assuming that God invites me into the house out of obligation rather than real love, leaving others to savor the sweetness of heaven while I burn in hell because my overblown sense of integrity will not permit me to live forgiven or enjoy what I did not earn.

I'll just work the land, help pay the bill without ordering a drink for myself, and walk away; somebody has to be responsible.

I'm pretty sure that part of the reason my own brother left God's house for so many years is that he saw how hard I worked and how miserable and miserly I could be.

My work ethic and joylessness helped push him out, though God has never mentioned it to me, so instead I have taken it upon myself to judge myself for it, as if that were my place.

It's my way, perhaps, of trying to avoid the predictable trap of judging my siblings, though of course I do that too.

I apologize to all of you who resonate with the younger brother and suffer my earnest stupidity,
but I suspect that many of you are with me out in the field.

If you are listening to this, it means you were responsible enough to set your clocks ahead and
you aren't completely hung over from St. Patrick's Saturday, so my guess is you are either
coming home desperate to strike a deal with God or, more likely, you never left and have
no understanding but plenty of secondhand opinions about those who have.

It is with us, the fuming faithful, the righteous and responsible and reluctant, that this story still
hangs in the balance.

What will we say to the one who began to plead with us and still stands waiting for those of us
who never left to summon the compassion or the courage to show up for the first time?

It may help us all, prodigals and pricks alike, to overlook the obvious contrasts between us,
drawn with such flair by Jesus' precise verbal lines, and to see that we are so very much
the same.

Both brothers are cowards; one lacked the fortitude to stay, the other lacked the courage to leave.
Both brothers dishonor their father.

The youngest does so obviously and early by asking for his inheritance, essentially telling his
father he is dead to him.

The oldest does so by refusing to come in, refusing to do his father's bidding even as he boasts
about never disobeying any of his commands.

When the whole town comes over to celebrate, they will notice who's not there, who remains in
the field shaming his father with his principled absence from the party.

Brennan Manning has written,

*I can be addicted to vodka or to being nice, to marijuana or being loved, to cocaine or
being right, to gambling or relationships, to golf or gossiping.*

*Perhaps my addiction is food, performance, money, popularity, power, revenge, reading,
television, tobacco, weight or winning.*

When we give anything more priority than we give to God, we commit idolatry.

Thus we all commit idolatry countless times every day. (The Ragamuffin Gospel, Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000.)

We all shame our loving father, all of us, whether we run away to a distant country or hide in the
proximity of pious religion.

We are all estranged from God, whether we wake up hung over in a foreign pigsty or sober in
the next bedroom, whether we are lost in the faraway country or in the front yard.

God has to come out of the house and run after us all.

And there is at least one more thing the two brothers share, and that of course is the same father.

We are stuck with each other because we are inseparably bound by baptism, so we might
as well learn to get along.

God will not rest until we are together in the same house...and not only in the same house, but
enjoying ourselves, and one another.

The one the eldest complains about as *this son of yours* is the same one the father names *this
brother of yours*.

And not only do we have to endure each other, but we have to put up with this crazy parent too.
God is an embarrassment.

God's grace is a disgrace.

Such lavish and wanton forgiveness and welcome reveals a God who has no standards.

For an old man to run, ever, was considered in Jesus' day a scandal and a shame; old men were not supposed to run; it was beneath their dignity.

They certainly were not to run after wayward sons who squandered both their fortune and their family relationships.

The father in Jesus' story, the God in Jesus' heart, is a shambles and a shame:

an old man running after a bad son,
a prodigal father wasting his fortune on a failure,
a pitiful old fool with extravagant patience and forgiveness,
a desperate old codger reduced to begging with his respectable child,
an embarrassed, bloody criminal emasculated on a cross.

Our God appears neither powerful nor wise nor strong, but instead as a staggering clown who loves too deeply and desperately to bear.

God has no thought about reputation or respectability; God thinks only about the children God loves, children who are so very defiant and different and so very, very dear.

God runs out of the house to welcome us home, whether we have been to hell and back or we are still trapped in a self-made hell in heaven's front yard.

Whether we repent or not, whether we admit our obvious rebellion or stubbornly defend our duty-bound obedience, God chases and cherishes and celebrates us all, and still God stands in the field, pleading, begging, listening to our crap, cajoling, explaining, trying to convince us to come inside, a shameful wreck of a figure more desperate than the lost son, who will not go in the house without us, even if God has to die out there in our field waiting for us...which has already happened once and still God stands there.

*Amazing disgrace, how sweet the feet
that chased a wretch like me!*

*I once was lost, but now am found,
was bound, but now I'm free.*