

***The Gospel of Luke,
a Theological Application to our Lives***

Fr. Konrad Shaefer, OSB
July 8, 2022 | Conference VIII

Lk 15:11-3. Family Challenge: Strayed Son Returned ≠ His Elder Brother

Luke is forming a heterogeneous community of believers. The scribes and Pharisees complained about Jesus rubbing elbows with prostitutes and tax collectors, so he told them this parable.

A famine broke out in the country, and the strayed son got a job tending pigs; he got so hungry he wanted to eat the silage. For the Jew, taking care of pigs was rock bottom; the youth remembered the well-fed laborers in his father's house. Unhappily divorced from his family, he decided to return and prepared his speech. "Father, I have sinned against God and against you; I don't deserve to be called your son anymore. Take me back as a hired hand."

The sequel is the elder son in the field, that bears the memory of where Cain killed his younger brother, Abel; the field recalls Jacob his brother Esau who threatened to kill his crafty twin who had stolen his inheritance. The field is where Joseph's older brothers sold him to slave traders who in turn sold him in Egypt.

The elder son, coming in from the field, hears the music and dancing and, from one of the servants, learns of the welcome home in honor of his lost and found brother. His simmering resentment keeps him from attending. Refusing to listen to his old man, he explodes: "What's the use? That good-for-nothing son of yours wasted his inheritance that cost you so much work. I slaved for you all my life and you never even gave me a barbecue with my friends!"

His father replies: "Son, everything I have is yours. Your dead brother came back to life." The story ends with the elder son emotionally paralyzed by a grudge.

At the end of the day, the inheritance is not earned; it's an offer waiting for us to respond. The younger son accepted the invitation. By his refusal his elder brother divorced himself from the family. He didn't understand that the inheritance consists in the Father's love, free of charge. After the disaster of his personal projects to achieve happiness, one son returned home and received the father's love, any debt cancelled. The egocentric projects of his elder brother prevented him from happiness, and, thus, he wasted his inheritance in a more dreadful way

than his younger brother ever did. Is this parable an example of the rift between Simon the Pharisee and the repentant sinner at Jesus' feet? Does it resonate with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus at his door?

This parable baffles the prevailing scale of values. The law-abiding Pharisees were convinced they were God's favorites. The parable lays the cards of our feelings and attitudes on the table. Our birthright is the infinite goodness of a loving Father who loves both sons, each one having abused the inheritance in his own way. The father waits for each son to take his part in the family. As long as somebody remains outside, the family is incomplete.

Luke 15:25-32

¹¹ Jesus said, "A man had two sons, ¹² and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. ¹³ After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. ¹⁴ When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. ¹⁵ So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. ¹⁶ And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. ¹⁷ Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. ¹⁸ I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.'" ²⁰ So he got up and went back to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹ His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' ²² But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' Then the celebration began.

²⁵ Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. ²⁷ The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ He replied to his father, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. ³⁰ But when that son of yours returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' ³¹ He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. ³² But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'" (≈NAB)

Observations

- v. 11, a single father, with 2 children; absent mother
- v. 12, the younger addresses the father, “Father”; requested a pre-death distribution of the inheritance
- v. 13, he left for a faraway country, and his life went from bad to worse
- v. 14, extreme famine; in the Joseph story (Genesis) famine motivated the reunion of the family in Egypt
- v. 15, he worked on a pig farm (pigs, repeated), which illustrates how far removed he was from the family
- v. 16, starving, he craved pig fodder; nobody gave him anything: he had achieved an independent but empty life
- v. 17, “he came into himself” (lit., “coming to himself”) ... “my father”
- v. 18, “I will rise” (again, v. 20): “my father...”, “Father”
- v. 19, I don’t deserve to be called your son
- v. 20, “he rose” (cf. v. 18)
- v. 21, “Father... I do not deserve to be called your son”
- v. 22, change of dress = change of dignity; the ring and sandals, restored to full membership in the family
- v. 23, fatted calf (vv. 23.27.30); earlier he wanted to eat the pig silage; the contrast with the elder son’s compliant about never receiving even a goat to celebrate with
- v. 24, the father says, “my son”, once dead, now resurrected (v. 32)
- v. 25, his eldest son... in the field (like Cain or Esau, or the Joseph’s older brothers)
- v. 26, the elder son identifies more with the servants
- v. 27, a servant sows discontent in his report, “your brother... your father”
- v. 28, the father came out, and his elder son refused to enter
- v. 29, he replied to his father, “I slaved for you” and complains about the barbecue he never got with his friends
- v. 30, “that son of yours” devoured your goods with prostitutes. Until now nothing had been reported about how he squandered his inheritance; his retort is a projection of his frustrated passions (cf. v. 13)
- v. 31, father addresses his resentful son: “Son, you are always with me”
- v. 32, Your brother ... dead and resurrected ... lost and found (cf. v. 24)

Reflection

The parables are designed to catch the listener’s attention and invite us to reflect. Each parable moves its listeners in different ways. Here, both the older son and his brother ask the reader: “Who am I? Do I identify more with the older son or with the younger? Or maybe both? Where does the eldest and the youngest son

find a place in my life? The evangelist is intent on forming a community of believers.

The theme of the family of two sons places in relief the polarity in the heart, just as Martha and Mary complement each other in life, or the pious Pharisee and publican contrast two attitudes in prayer. In our heart dwells the younger son, who would like to roam free from law and responsibility; there, also, dwells the elder son, who is enslaved by a rigid sense of duty. The evangelist reflects how both inclinations inhabit our interior. In what way do I divorce myself from home and family? By wandering free in faraway places, or by being such a stickler to duty that love has grown cold? The parable invites us to return to the Father and be welcomed home.

Jesus narrates the parable of the “prodigal family” in the presence of scribes and Pharisees, scandalized because he ate with sinners (15,2). Jesus tells us not only about who God is or how a person can be brought to conversion and salvation, but how he himself acts. He dines with sinners and makes the Father’s mercy patent here and now. Jesus descended from heaven to unveil the face of the Father who has compassion on people who have lost their way, lost their very selves, who are interiorly dead and have become strangers to themselves. By eating and drinking with outsiders, Jesus presents a lively drama of the merciful God.

What Jesus does by eating with sinners occurs in the Eucharist. In this celebration God offers a banquet, and we, who had been dead and have returned to life, who had been lost and found, rejoice in our holy communion with Christ. He calls the dead to a new life, taps the life that flows in the interior of the person. Jesus seeks out lost and missing persons. With his parables, Jesus kindles the hope of people who have reached the end of their rope, those labeled as beyond recovery. For such people, too, conversion is possible. There’s no reason to despair. Even when we go on a fling, abandon ourselves to craziness, and end up eating pig food, the possibility remains of a return to the Father’s home, where we will be in communion with God as his children.

The second half of the parable turns to tragedy. The elder son is resentful and doesn’t join the party.

Each of the actors is characterized by his feeling and passion. The younger son wakes up, smells the bacon, and recovers his lost “self”; the father overflows with compassion; the elder son stays angry. Like the Pharisees, he has made every effort to fulfill God’s law and comply with his obligation, but he finds no joy in his dutiful life. We might identify with the elder son. We, too, can live to fulfill our commitments and obligations, do God’s will, but joyless, bothered by other people who don’t behave right. Such an attitude shows that our motivation is not pure, we derive little joy in what we do or who we are.

The unconscious motives that kept the elder son home made him resentful to the point of anger; his response to his father is poignant. “All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any of your orders, yet you never even offered me so much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends. But, for that son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property –he and his loose women– you kill the fatted calf” (15:29-30). True, the dutiful son had fulfilled the father’s will, but out of ulterior motives. He wanted recognition, some reward. He secretly hoped the father would distinguish him for staying home like a “good boy.”

Beneath the façade of the elder brother’s decency, one senses repressed sexual fantasies. In the chronicle of the younger son’s wasteful life, it was never reported that he squandered his money on prostitutes. This idea was spawned in his stay-at-home brother’s projection. In the elder brother, Luke describes our shadow side that tries to hide under a pious façade.

The father tenderly addresses the elder son, “*My son*, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because *your brother* here was dead and has come to life, he was lost and is found” (15:31-32). Dad tries to convince his son that the one he refers to as “that son of yours” is also “your brother.” That the strayed sheep has been found, that the dead has been raised to life, is reason enough to celebrate.

Elder Son

For a time, one son is driven by his impulses, leaves his father’s house, but then returns. The stay-at-home son distances himself on principle and in the end is

outside the family circle, pondering the barbecue with his friends that never happened. He clings to his complaint. In the end, the one who never left home finds himself outside the family circle. If there is tenderness, and generosity in the home, it does not convince the son who withdraws into his repressed, resentful self, because in that house, according to the reports of a servant, he will find not only a prodigal brother whom he can't tolerate but, above all, a father prodigal in his mercy. The elder son who complains, "That son of yours who devoured your goods with a scandalous life," won't tolerate a father who pardons the reprobate and welcomes him home. How to live in a house where the heart rules more than order and discipline, where mercy surpasses a person's sense of justice? How to tolerate a family circle where the sinner receives forgiveness without reproach?

The elder son doesn't realize that, in a sense, he too must return, change his attitude, yes, and be forgiven his unfailing observance, the petty moralism, the pretense of the exemplary son. In a sense, this parable illustrates the breakdown of human logic, and moves us to "theo-logic": the refusal to accept my brother is equivalent to rejecting "Our" Father.

It's striking that the "prodigal son" calls him "father" repeatedly and with feeling and devotion, while the elder son neither pronounces "father" nor "my brother". He divorces the family, he stays outside in the field, like Cain in Genesis, who killed his brother.

The elder son misses something essential. What's the use of obedience without joy? (To calculate how far he strayed, listen to the complaint of the heir to his father's estate: he gripes about a miserable kid goat.) How to forgive the joy over his brother's return, how to forgive his father's forgiveness? That son who refused to enter the home that received his brother was proud of not getting lost, not "going away" like his prodigal brother, but the irony is that he became a slave of his sense of justice. I wonder if his brother was referring to him when he mused, "How many of my father's workers have more than enough to eat, while here I am starving!"

The father pleads with his righteous son: "Son, you are always with me; Everything that is mine is yours". Is this what scares him, making his father's heart his own, his love beyond his sense of justice? If it were a matter of measuring

justice, the elder son is an expert. But here it's not a question of judging, but rather of being "prodigal", of opening and emptying, that is, of loving without limits. So, one son, who despises his birthright to such a father, remains outside the family circle.

Gentle Listeners, we learn something from the tragedy of the elder son: a refusal to recognize the brother is a rejection of the Our Father, and that simple refusal dismantles the family home. The eldest son did not forgive the father prodigal for his love and tolerance; and without his forgiveness, the family remains incomplete, without remedy. What does Saint Benedict teach us? "Let them tolerate with the utmost patience one another's infirmities, whether of body or character" (RB 72).

What does Jesus teach us who pretend to live in community and form a Church? One lesson reveals the true face of God, disfigured by the weight of the law and the rigor of human judgment. What is God like? How do we, created in his image and likeness, present ourselves before him? God is not a despot who limits human freedom and denies well-being. And if the son leaves the family home, he need not hesitate to return; he will always be received with the gracious Father's open arms. Do we forgiven sinners expect less? To what extent do we consent to inherit our gracious Father's merciful heart?

In the parable, a son, far from home, got hungry, and longed to eat the pig food. When he returns, they kill the fat calf and celebrate a Eucharistic feast. The one starving, returned, and was restored. The irony is that the other son wanted his brother dead, or at least punished, and he preferred to fast—he had never even asked for a barbecue with his friends—and he chooses, for a time, to remain outside the family circle.

Read this parable and reflect how it might express your own choices in life, your demands, and sentiments. Each son reveals what might be hidden in the soul, and each sheds light on the merciful Father. We can identify with the father, the elder son or the younger, the careless or the correct son, the stray or the conformist. Each son in his own way was dead and lost: one to his impulsive illusions, the other to a correct life truncated by fear and judgments. The merciful father invites us to a

eucharistic feast. Jesus invites us to find joy in a community of brothers, all sons of a Father, prodigal in mercy and love.

From a look in the mirror, we ask ourselves, who am I? In what ways do I identify more with the elder son? With the younger? Where does the elder son find a home in my heart? And the younger? What steps can I take toward reconciliation?