

<sup>1</sup>Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” <sup>3</sup>So he told them this parable:

<sup>11</sup>“There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup>A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ <sup>20</sup>So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup>But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup>“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

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The parable Jesus tells in our gospel lesson today is commonly called the “The Prodigal Son.” Prodigal means “wasteful or recklessly extravagant,” which is a description that I imagine the

older brother would have used to describe his father. The father has already divided his estate and given a portion of it to the younger brother. That's troubling enough, but now the father is throwing a party, using valuable resources that one day will rightfully belong to this elder brother. So, yes, I'm sure when the older brother caught wind of the party, he definitely thought the father was being reckless and wasteful.

This parable is one of the most well-known stories in all the Bible. But why does it appear in our lectionary during Lent? Usually Lenten gospel lessons deal with following Jesus. Or they give us insight into the cross. This story does neither, so why Lent? The reason ties back to the message in last Sunday's gospel, where Jesus emphatically says that people need to repent. I say that word and images of a hellfire-and-brimstone sermon might come to mind. That isn't the origin of the word, though. The original meaning of repent in the Judaism of Jesus' time was simply a turning around. If you mess up, you don't keep going down that path, you make amends, you turn around, and you redirect yourself to a better destination; in a religious sense, that destination is always God. The whole process requires humility, a willingness to admit fault, and a turning to so that our focus is on a better outcome. We see this repentance in this parable. The younger brother messes up, he turns around in order to make amends with his father, who is gracious and ready to accept him. So that settles it; the story is about repentance, and that is why we read it in Lent. We can read this story with the satisfaction of seeing ourselves as the younger brother, knowing that we are embraced by a gracious father. But... there is that pesky ending to this story: the part about the older brother.

Before jumping fully into the ending, one point of interpretation needs to be addressed. A common interpretation says that the Christian community are like the younger brother who is welcomed home graciously, and the Jews are the older brother who doesn't want to join the party. That has been a harmful interpretation, it was certainly not Jesus' point, plus it is being dishonest: the Jews know and celebrate God's grace in their religion. The story's structure should lead everyone – Christian, Jew, anyone who reads it – to ponder this question: how do I respond when events do not occur on my own terms? When things don't go the way that I feel they should go, do I become angry? Do I lash out at the people closest to me, or at others? Or do I reflect on how the events transpired, and I then learn from it? Is it possible for me to change course and potentially celebrate

even though events didn't play out on my own terms? The parable's structure asks all readers to ponder that.

The reconciliation that takes place in the story is on the father's terms, because he is the one who was wronged by the younger brother. That rubbed the older brother the wrong way, because in his opinion the younger sibling should have got what he deserved. The younger one should be groveling. In a culture that elevates honor so highly, the younger brother has brought shame to himself and most importantly to his family. The just thing would be for the younger brother to get what he deserves. The righteous thing would be for the younger brother to be shamed and forced to work to make amends for all that he has done wrong. That is what the older brother expects because that is how the world works. In his view, there is no question how the younger should be treated upon his return. Yet, grace can get in the way of how we want the world to work. Grace gets in the way. And when the world doesn't work the way we expect it to, we can be enraged.

I've been worked up and even angry before, and I imagine most of us have experienced something like that. In that state of mind, our brains connect dots in very creative ways. Suddenly we are parsing out all the worst outcomes that could unfold and what those outcomes would mean for us. When we are angered, aren't we thinking through all the ways that we've been wronged, never mind how others might have had it worse? That is why the elder brother hears the party going on, and his first thought is how his due inheritance is being used to celebrate the younger brother's return. Never mind that the father is still alive and the resources still belong to him, and never mind that it was the father who was wronged the most. So the father pleads with the elder brother, saying, "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." He reassures his elder son that just because the younger received grace instead of getting what he deserved, that doesn't diminish any part of the relationship the father has with the older brother. In the end, the father is asking the older brother to turn around from his anger, and to come join the celebration. The story comes to a sudden end, without telling us whether the elder brother joins the party. It ends that way – as a cliffhanger – because the story is ultimately not about the younger brother's repentance, it is about our repentance.

We are supposed to see ourselves in the older brother, and we are supposed to question whether we are ready to repent and join this party of grace. Although the answer to that might sound easy, remember that repentance means turning away from a destructive path and turning toward God's path. We can't take the destructive parts with us as we make the turn. In the example of the parable, the destructive path the elder brother was on was a path of anger. Even before the pandemic, there was a lot of anger boiling over in our society. Anger on many sides of many issues. The pandemic certainly didn't do much to calm people down, and in many ways it has made people's anger worse. That might even be the case for some of us listening today. Today's parable reminds us of a truth, which is this: there is grace to be shared. There is plenty of it for you, and it will always be offered. But to fully appreciate that grace, to fully allow that grace to permeate our lives, we can't enter into the party still clinging to our anger. We need to let go of the anger. We need to repent of it.

A pastoral colleague of mine texted me this past week to say he had a conversation with a parishioner. For Lent, this parishioner has given up listening to his favorite political commentators, and after a couple weeks of fasting from those voices, he needed to talk to his pastor. He told my friend that he has realized after just a few weeks away from those voices that he doesn't carry around as much fear and anger now. The truth is some powers want you and I to be fearful of others and to be angry. Anger is a powerful emotion, and many people know how to manipulate anger in order to gain some control over others. I've said it before and I'll likely say it again in the future: people will be disciples of someone, somewhere. If a person spends an hour each Sunday morning hearing Jesus' message to love God and to love our neighbor, and that same person then spends multiple hours per week listening to voices that insinuate that we should fear and potentially hate our neighbor, it doesn't take a genius to figure out whose disciple that person will be.

It is Lent, the season for us to dwell on the cross, to repent... to let go of and turn around from the things that draw us away from God. The celebration of God's grace is always open for us. The party of grace is for you and for me, yet the Father desires us to fully experience it with nothing holding us back. If it is anger that is holding us back, we must repent of it... let go of it, and come to appreciate the fullness of God's gracious celebration. Amen.