

Three Challenges, Three Opportunities, of Love
A Sermon on Luke 15 by the Rev. Philip Major
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I've been walking through my garden, looking for signs of spring. The clover I planted to keep the weeds away is like a dense, bright green blanket. The daffodils are looking beautiful. They seem to actually enjoy the chilly, damp weather we've been having. Most exciting of all, the dark red shoots of my peonies are beginning to poke through the ground. In seven or eight weeks these stems will hold the most beautiful flowers in the garden. I planted peonies a few years ago because peonies are one of the most resilient, longest living flowering plants in the world. With minimal care and attention, peonies will bloom every spring for one hundred years or more.

The parables told by Jesus are like peonies. We come back to them year after year to hear new insights about life and love. The parable of the father who lost one, or perhaps both, of his sons is one of the richest of these parables. It is found only in the Gospel of Luke, which means we only hear it once every three years, when Luke is our Gospel.

At the beginning of chapter fifteen Luke observes that the highly religious people of Jesus' time were following him around. They were complaining that Jesus was welcoming and even eating meals with notorious sinners, such as people who had served time in prison for their crimes. So Jesus tells them three parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the father who lost one, or perhaps both, of his sons. These are all parables about wealthy people losing something. The main message of chapter fifteen is that wealth and treasures can be obstacles that keep us from returning to God. But there is more.

A parable always offers many different ways of looking at the story. The word 'parable' is related to a word you might remember from high school geometry: parabola. Like a big, arching parabola, a parable provides many different angles for viewing the characters and actions in the story. We should be careful to avoid looking at parables in ways that get us stuck in one viewpoint.

For instance, in the parable of the father and his sons, some preachers, possibly including me, have turned this parable into a simpler kind of story, called an allegory. If the story is an allegory, then the father might be seen as God, and the older son might be seen as the Jews, and the younger son might be seen as the Christians. Reading the parable this way gets us stuck. This type of reading is mostly about expressing our prejudices about other groups. It also ignores that for Jesus there was no separation between Jews and followers of Christ. An allegorical reading of the parable also ignores the reality that all of the characters make some serious mistakes and all of them offer points of wisdom.

This kind of simplification and prejudice leads us away from God. Jesus told parables because the truth of God's love is beyond our comprehension. God's love cannot be fully explained with a single version of a story.

Today I'd like us to consider that the three characters in the story help us learn about three challenges and three opportunities for those of us who seek to love one another.

Let's consider the three challenges first. The younger son is very selfish. His selfishness is the root of his mistakes. The young son is decisive and quick in his actions. This kind of quick, decisive behavior is disastrous for those who are selfish and have little concern for others. The younger son's selfishness leads him to break his most important relationships. Our selfishness is a serious threat to our ability to follow Jesus' commandment to love one another.

The older son is very proud. He is not humble. He is concerned about his own honor. This leads him to be defensive. The older son is more concerned for what is fair than for what is merciful. The older son is more concerned for his own honor than he is for his relationships with this father and his brother. If we are very concerned to protect our honor and our privileges, our

relationships will be brittle and easily broken. From the older son we learn that pride is a serious threat to our ability to love one another.

The father is very human. We don't know what happened before the beginning of this story, but I wonder if the father had always been so generous and wise as he was at the end. I wonder if the father might have acted in a way that prompted the younger son to ask for his inheritance and leave home as a young man.

One thing that seems pretty clear is that the father is making some serious mistakes. The father did not even bother to send a servant into the fields to tell the good news to his older son. The older son finds out about the celebration several hours later when he hears the sounds of the party from a distance. The father is blind to the respect and trust the older son has maintained in their relationship. Let's notice that since the entire estate now belongs to his older son, the father has essentially taken a fattened calf that belonged to his older son and slaughtered it for the party for his younger son, without even asking the older son.

When his younger son left home at an early age, with that bag of silver coins, the father seemed to know he was headed for trouble. He grieves the loss of his son, as if he had died. We can sympathize. Many of us have had similar experiences. But we see that this person's grief has led him to make some serious mistakes. At the end of the story we don't know whether the father lost his older son the day he recovered his younger son.

The parable of the father who lost one, or perhaps both, of his sons leads me to ask a question I've never considered before. When does grief become a mistake? When does grief lead us away from God? When we are blinded by our grief, grief leads us away from God, away from love, away from the people God has given us.

This parable also offers us three opportunities of love. These are three ways our lives can turn back toward God, back toward love, back toward the people God has given us.

The younger son demonstrates the first opportunity. You and I have opportunity to repent. To repent is to tell the truth about mistakes we have made. To repent is to stop blaming someone else or making excuses for our behavior. The younger son repents, which allows him to ask for forgiveness. His decision to repent turns the parable from a story of stupidity, tragedy, and grief into a story of repentance, forgiveness, and love. Repentance is the first opportunity for people who are trying to love.

God has given us the ability to turn back towards God. This act of turning back toward God's way is so important we practice it every Sunday as we say the prayer of confession.

The older son demonstrates the second opportunity of love. You and I have the opportunity to build relationships of trust. There is very little attention on this in the parable, but the older son is building a relationship of trust with his father. He acted with respect for him, in spite of the fact that, after the request of the younger son, the rest of the estate technically belonged to the older son. The older son was patient. He showed respect for his father's wisdom and experience. The older son worked steadily, year after year. This is the way we build trust with one another, which is the second opportunity of love.

The father demonstrates the third opportunity of love. The father forgives the younger son for his outrageous behavior. To forgive is to do what the father has done. The father will not pay any more attention to the mistakes made by his son. The father will not hold any sort of grudge.

Forgiveness is an extreme form of generosity. When we are having difficulty forgiving someone else, we can try to at least be generous to them, which is kind of like a baby-step version of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the most powerful form of generosity. Forgiveness is the third opportunity of love because when we forgive someone for the hurts they have caused us, the injuries we have suffered, and the injuries they have suffered, can finally be healed.

We say that God is love. You and I were created in the image of the God who is love, so we have the opportunity to love, the way God loves us. God is seeking a relationship of trust with us. Likewise, love is the opportunity to build relationships of trust through our respect for others. God is generous and forgives us. Likewise, love is the opportunity to be generous, even to the point of forgiving one another. God's great desire is for us to turn back toward God. Likewise, love is the opportunity to turn back towards God, and back towards the people God has given us.