March 10, 2013

© Jean E. Mornard

Whenever we think about the parable of the prodigal son, we, quite naturally think of the prodigal son himself as being the central figure. But he's not the only actor in this drama. There are two more who are also central to the story – the father and the other son.

Each of these characters has a story to tell, and each has a lesson for us. Let's start with the prodigal himself. His is a classic story of a mistake-filled life made right again. He's every drug addict or alcoholic who's gotten clean and made amends as part of his twelve-step program. He's every embezzler who's bilked his company out of a lot of money, then returned it and taken his punishment. He's every cheating spouse who's confessed or gets caught and begged to be taken back.

He's every sinner who repents. Or is he?

He behaves terribly to his father by basically saying, "Dad, I can't wait any longer for you to kick the bucket, so can I just have my dough now," no doubt hurting and humiliating him terribly. And then, after he has squandered it all and is starving, he comes back without any pretentions to being taken back into the family, but is willing to work as a farm hand. But is this repentance? All he tells us about his motivation is that the he thinks he'd be better off as a farm hand for his father than starving in a Gentile pig sty.

Then there's the father. What a goof this guy is! First of all, he doesn't sent his son packing after being told the son would prefer it if he were dead. Where is this guy's pride? Does he think he's doing his son a favor by letting him get away with being a jerk?

And then, after the son blows what amounts to half of the father's money and lands, what does he do, but welcome him back with open arms and throw a big party for him. He doesn't even wait for the son to offer to be a farm hand, which would probably have been good for him, right? What a pushover!

And finally, there's the older son. He's the upright one, the hard worker, the goody two shoes. It's understandable that he's pretty ticked off when his no-good brother comes waltzing back and his father treats him like he's come back from the dead. What's fair about that? Why should he endorse his father's stupid behavior by going to the party, when his father wouldn't even let him have a barbecue for his friends on a Friday night after all the chores are done?

Leaving aside the father for now, let's try to put ourselves in the shoes of the two sons. I don't know about you, but without resorting to exaggeration, I really find it hard to identify with the younger son, the prodigal. I've never squandered anything in dissolute living. I've never been reduced to eating pig slop for any reason, and certainly not because of anything I've done. I've led kind of a boring life, I guess.

So rather than identify with the younger son, I tend to put him in the category, Absent Sinner.

I have a little easier time with the older son, but I don't like it too much. He's a real Crabby McCrankypants. The personification of sour grapes. Not only does he distance himself from his brother by not going to his party or even welcoming him home, and by making up the part about prostitutes, thereby slandering him; but he also distances himself from his father by his behavior and by his language. When the father is talking to the elder son, he refers to the younger son as "this brother of yours." However, the elder son refers to his brother not as "my brother," but as "this son of yours."

When I put it like that, I don't want to identify with the older son at all. So I'll put him in the category, Self-Righteous Martyr.

But here's an unpleasant news flash. We are all both of these characters, both the Absent Sinner and the Self-Righteous Martyr to some degree or another.

Whether or not we've lived a life of dissipation and ended up in a ditch, which most of us haven't, who hasn't in some way turned their back on something or someone in hopes of finding something better in the next pasture? Who hasn't taken the easy road once or twice when staying the course was just too hard? Our actions don't have to be drastic to be damaging to us and to others.

And who hasn't bemoaned someone else getting something for free that we have to pay for with, say, our taxes. I can't tell you how many Facebook posts I've hidden from honest-to-God friends of mine (as opposed to cyber friends whom I've never actually met) because they say things like, "Why should we give our hard-earned money to poor people? It's OURS – we earned it!" There's usually a subtext to these posts, like, "Poor people should just pull themselves up by their bootstraps and work, like I have to," or my personal favorite, "Welfare only encourages them to be lazy." These are the, quote, GOOD people, the hard workers.

Jesus uses these two characters in this story to illustrate, among other things, two extremes of the same behavior. And that behavior is selfishness.

The younger son, the Absent Sinner's selfishness is obvious. He disrespects his father in order to get what he considers to be rightfully his. Never mind that it isn't rightfully his until his father dies, but he doesn't think about that. Nor does he think about how much hurt he inflicts on his father by wishing he were dead, and by deserting his family to follow his own pleasure.

And by his little speech to his father behind the barn, the older son, the Self-Righteous Martyr, demonstrates how much all of his hard work is NOT for the benefit his father. It is to bolster his own reputation, and to add fuel to his fire of martyrdom at having to stay home and not being able to go out and party.

This is a more insidious form of selfishness. As C.S. Lewis put it in *The Screwtape Letters*, - *"*She's the sort of woman who lives for others *-* you can tell the others by their hunted expression." No, neither of these two boys are much to write home about.

But back to the father. This father was so generous and loves his boys so much it makes him foolish. Who but a fool would give away half of his property to an ungrateful and disrespectful brat of a son? Who but a fool would welcome that son back unconditionally, and throw a big party for all the neighbors to see how foolish he is. And who but a fool would beg his sullen older son to join the party in the face of that son's anger and resentment.

Who but a fool would eat with tax collectors and sinners?

In this season of Lent, it would be easy to focus on the sins of the two sons, and their repentance or not. But today I would rather focus on God, who makes himself foolish by reaching out generously and lovingly to us over and over, every time we stray away from him, and who rejoices to welcome us home when we finally turn back to him.

This parable is the third of three parables about lost things being found, following the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. The difference in this parable is that two things are lost – the prodigal son and the resentful son. But only one turns back of his own volition. The other one, as the story stands, refuses to leave his self-imposed life of misery. He turns his back on his father, while staring him right in the face.

Remember what I said about the younger son repenting? He didn't really, not in so many words. But his actions spoke for him. He came home. He opted to change his life, but without any expectation of reward. And his father rejoiced just as God rejoices every single time we turn away back to him, whether it is from a life of dissipation and dissolution, or merely from a life furthering our own selfish ends. God rejoices and welcomes us back, Every. Single. Time.

We don't know how this story ends. It's left for us to decide our own actions, to decide which son we are going to be. It's up to us to turn away from whatever selfish path we might be on. And we can do this with complete confidence, because we know that our loving father is waiting for us with open arms and a party.