If I could only remember what I’ve forgotten about the Bible I would be a walking library of scripture. Oh, sure, every once in a while a synapse fires in my brain, and some little shred of familiarity presents itself, but that’s rare. I’m just grateful for reference books and for resources on the internet.

For instance, I had forgotten that the parable of the Prodigal Son appears only in Luke’s gospel, none of the others. Another startling piece of news (well, it’s like news to me) is that it comes up only once in our three-year lectionary, on this Fourth Sunday in Lent, in Year C. We won’t read it again until 2025.

That strikes me as odd, given our familiarity with the story and its powerful point about God’s boundless love. In fact I can give no reliable estimate of the number of sermons I’ve given and heard, the number of reflections and meditations I’ve read, on this passage in chapter fifteen of Luke’s gospel.

Today I’d like to approach it, first, in terms of the actions of the major characters, leaving aside those minor characters whose roles are fleeting: the citizens of the other country, the farmers’ slaves, the revelers at the welcome-home party, and the pigs fed by the prodigal son.

Those who top the cast, in order of appearance, are the father, the younger son, and the older son.

So, first, the father (called simply “a man” in the first line:

* He has two sons. Presumably, he also has had a wife, though Jesus doesn’t mention her. Maybe he’s a widower.
* When the younger son asks him for his share of the property (what would have been his inheritance upon his father’s death), he gives it to him.
* When this younger son returns home after a period of dissolute living (nice phrase), he runs out to greet him and throws his arms around him, kisses him.
* He calls for the best robe and a ring for his son.
* He calls for a fatted calf and throws a party for him.
* He says, “My son was dead, and now he’s alive!”
* He pleads with his older son to come join the party.
* When that son complains that the father has never thrown a party for him, he says, “Everything I have is yours!” (Which I suppose is literally true, since the other son has already cashed in his part.)

Okay, so that’s the dad.

Younger son (whose entrance is in the second line):

* Tells his father he wants his share of the property now instead of later.
* Takes a few days to convert the property to cash, and get his things together.
* Takes off for a distant country.
* Once there, he blows all his money on that dissolute living (what his brother calls, simply, “prostitutes”).
* Goes hungry.
* Gets a job—not a very good job—feeding pigs.
* Gets up and goes to his father.
* On his way he composes an apology and a plea for work as a hired hand on the family farm.
* When his father hugs and kisses him, he delivers the speech he had composed.
* Parties with friends and neighbors, courtesy of his father.

Okay, that does it, action-wise, for the title character. (A title we’ve made up, by the way—“prodigal” isn’t in the text.)

Older son (a latecomer in the arc of the story):

* He comes back to the farmhouse after another day of working in the field.
* He asks a slave, “What’s up?” and the slave brings him up to speed about his brother’s return and his father’s reaction, including the party.
* He gets angry and refuses to join the party.
* Meets his father’s entreaties to be a sport by saying, “Listen! [the actual word in our text] . . . Listen! You give this bum a party, and here I am, working my fingers to the bone for you, and I’ve never had a party. No dice. I’ll stay out here, thank you very much.”

I might not have hit every single action item, but I think that summary captures the main points, even when the action is speech—because speaking is an action also.

Now, motives. Well, who knows? But I guess a little conjecture doesn’t hurt, so long as we remember we’re making up this part.

Father: was he always overindulgent with his young son? Was he feeling guilty because he had been the opposite of that in the early part of his sons’ lives? Had he been a lousy father after his wife’s death (presuming she died)? Was he maybe glad to be rid of the young one because he’d always been a rebellious wild child, creating problems for him? Did he feel guilty over taking the older brother for granted? Did he feel even more relief when the young one returned, as when he said, “He was dead; now he’s alive”? (And “maybe I didn’t ruin him after all”?)

We could imagine other possible motives, but, as I said, they’re all pure conjecture.

The younger son: Well, see above: an inveterate wild child, a kid who couldn’t wait to get away from a difficult home life? Someone so committed to partying that he couldn’t see beyond the next drink, the next woman? Trying to run away from addiction, only to find himself even more in its grip?

Dunno. We don’t know.

Older son: Was he always a pain in the neck, an earnest, dutiful, joyless follower of rules and his father’s wishes? Was he always resentful of his father’s attitude toward his brother? Was he just depressingly trudging through his life? Did he love his father so much that he was gutted by feeling taken advantage of?

We. Don’t. Know.

One way to reflect on the meaning of this parable in our own lives is to try on each of the characters in turn. How am I, or have I been, like the father, the younger son, the older son? Given the actions of each, can I imagine my own motivations and feelings, even going beyond the conjecture I’ve presented?

Jesus tells this parable in the midst of a string of parables. He’s been to a dinner party given by one of the Pharisees and is appalled by the guests trying to lord it over each other and by the hypocrisy of paying more attention to the rules and laws of the faith than to the essence of those—the love of God.

Specifically, he’s responding to comments and questions about the kingdom of God. He’s saying, in one parable after another, “this is what the kingdom of God is like.”

So, even though it can be a fruitful exercise to imagine ourselves in this story, to look honestly and objectively at our own actions and motivations, we need to remember that Jesus means for the parable as a whole to portray the kingdom of God, the very nature of God.

God is the loving father who sweeps aside the foolish, wasteful, immoral actions of the son and rejoices: “You’re back!” While the older son concentrates on what he sees as inequity and injustice—“Listen! I’m a hard worker, and he’s a playboy”—the father says, “Yeah, but he’s come back to us, back to the bosom of the family. He’s back with us, where he belongs!”

Now, like the older brother, we might think the father’s doing a lousy job here. And come on, we all know instances where “tough love” demands some difficult words and actions with our kids. But this isn’t about that. This is about God’s love.

We might think, “Well, God’s not doing such a great job here; this just isn’t responsible parenting.” And we would be joining a host of other Christians (and non-believers for that matter) in our attitude.

And that’s precisely, I believe, why Jesus tells the story. And that’s why it’s a good thing that God is God, and we’re not. I cast my lot, any day, with our God who says, “Look, I know you’ve been way less than perfect . . . but . . . welcome home!”

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