

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C
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You might not know it, but our Bible stories have editors. These are people whose job it is to make sure that the sentences make sense, flow well in English, and reflect the themes of the original authors. But Biblical editors have a habit that drives me nuts, and I wish they would just stop. If you look in your Bible, the editors give titles to the stories that don't appear in the original. This sounds like a silly pet peeve, but I actually believe it has outsized ramifications. For instance, you might read the story of Mary being told she is going to have God's baby. The editors often title it "The Annunciation of Mary." And that's fine. But, you could also title it "Mary's Faithfulness." Or "The Yes that Changed the World." Or even, "Teen Girl Foils Death and the Devil" The editors have an oversized power in decided how we are going to experience a particular story. And the problem with these little editorial extravagances is that they don't give us the opportunity to experience the story without someone else's point of view grafted onto it. I'd much rather that the stories breathe and stimulate our imaginations.

Today, for instance, we meet the Prodigal Son. But that's just the thing. Prodigal Son is just some title that some well-meaning editor put on the story ages ago. And, immediately, it focuses us on just one character in the parable, and it focuses us on just one of his traits. He's a younger son who likes gambling and being naughty in Egypt. This title focuses all our attention in one part of the story, when I think the parable is supposed to capture our imagination in much less limited ways.

So, for now, I want you to erase the title "Prodigal Son" from your brain, and maybe together, just for this morning, we can come up with a better title — or no title at all.

A young man begs his father for an early inheritance. His father grants it. The young man spends the inheritance then returns home, penniless. The father, thinking his son had been lost or dead, welcomes the son home and asks that a feast be prepared. The older brother, who had stayed home, finds himself envious of the lavishness of the welcome party. He pleads his case and gives his complaints before his father, who says that the feast was necessary because the family's joy at the lost son's return simply cannot be contained.

A parable is meant to work its way into our psyches and start moving things around. It exists as a complex story that should defy easy classification or easy editorial. In a way, it's like a vivid dream — deep images and metaphors that get into our system like sand in an engine. We have to stop and address it before we can run smoothly again.

And just like a dream, every character in the story is you. You are the father who cannot help but rejoice in finding a child he thought lost. You are the older brother who has done everything right and cannot figure out why his efforts and obedience are not recognized. You are the younger son who has made many questionable decisions and who nevertheless receives grace that seems undeserved. Every person in this story has a perspective on how grace works, and

every person is both right and wrong. Or, put another way, they are muddling through this life and trying to be faithful as best as they can, and if that isn't the human condition, then I don't know what is.

So, maybe we can take some time to write some of our own titles. What if we called the story the Heartbroken Father. Imagine this man, living for years thinking that his youngest son is dead. Sit with his pain and his horror that perhaps, by granting the request of his youngest, he actually sent him to his death. Imagine parents who have dealt with addiction or suicide in their lives and how this story might sit with them. Imagine finding a child-thought-lost to be alive.

Or maybe the story should be called the Faithful Son. Why do we focus on the younger son, when the older has stayed and toiled for the sake of the family. Surely, we should give our attention to the one who has been a righteous man who met every expectation that was given to him. Surely, we ought to strive — in this season of Lent — to be like the faithful brother?

Or, in the end, maybe this story is really the Son in Pain? Did his mom die? Was he feeling suffocated by the rest of his righteous family? What was it that caused him to act out so explosively and then have to beg forgiveness. I have never in my life met someone who was acting horribly who wasn't in some kind of deep pain.

Jesus teaches in parables because they are complicated and tricky just as life is complicated and tricky. If you're able to put an easy title on your life, I'm pretty sure you are either incredibly lucky or you're doing it wrong. Our God takes the time to teach us in a way we might have a chance of understanding — in complicated stories that we tell, and re-tell over our entire Christian life. You will hear this parable one way today, and I guarantee you'll hear it differently when you encounter it again in the future. I have boundless compassion for that unwise young man today, but ask me again tomorrow, and I might think he's a fool, a liar, and a cheat.

So it is with all of us. No matter where you are in this life, no matter which of these roles you're playing today — the day is going to come when you're going to make a boneheaded decision. Hopefully it's not as drastic as losing your inheritance in Egypt, but it might be. And on that day, my prayer, and I believe the will of our God, is that you are seen by someone who loves you. My prayer is that you are remembered to God as someone who made a mistake rather than someone who IS a mistake. That little difference is everything, and it's the power in the parable. Life can get long, and life can get ugly, but there is no place you can run and nothing you can do that will keep God from throwing a feast when you return. In fact, we're about to have one here, at this table. Amen.