

This past week I received the following Enneagram daily reflection:

“Remember it’s not self-control that produces change but self-knowledge and awareness. Don’t try to change your reactions today. It is enough to see them more clearly.”

I thought of this helpful advice as I considered this Gospel from Luke on the parable of a dysfunctional family. Parables don’t immediately give us the full meaning, and this is true in today’s gospel which we have heard often. Getting deeper into its meaning calls for greater self-knowledge and awareness. Or as today’s psalm proclaims, “If today you hear God’s voice, harden not your hearts.” Parables may seem to be lacking something, or have a disquieting ingredient, maybe even a lack of common sense. They are not just stories but Jesus’ way of making us think and go into our own hearts.

There is much more in this parable than first meets the eye. We would like to know more. Was there a mother involved and how did she react? Did the older brother, in his arrogance, drive his younger brother away? What happened after the end of this Gospel? Did all become reconciled? Even the title is uncertain. English speaking readers labeled this story “The Prodigal Son.” German readers know it as Der Verlorne Sohn, the “Lost son.” Some suggest calling it the Irresponsible Father.

Why did Jesus tell this parable? What was the setting for this parable? Luke is clear. He says that “Pharisees and Scribes were complaining about Jesus. They complain that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Jesus is defending his table fellowship with the outcast. He responds by telling a story. There is something surprising about all three main characters – father, older son, and younger son. The setting should not be forgotten as it is read.

The father is really the main character in the story. He is extravagant in his giving into the younger son, and he receives him back without expecting recompense. Should we really admire him for this behavior? He is being humiliated before friends and neighbors. What does this tell us about God?

It is said that each son shows part of the Father. The older son shows his work ethic, “What is my duty that I should do it. I can earn my father’s love and be admired for my diligence.” He is over-responsible, stiff and righteous where his father is stable, mature and grounded. Perhaps he has become arrogant and

demanding in his duties. He is missing something and that is especially love. The Father loves each one of us and we don't earn that love and we are to rejoice in the life and love of others, even when they don't seem to deserve it. We may lack the Father's unconditional love, especially for those that are lost. We resent and may be envious of those who fall and then get up.

The younger son has another side of his father. He is open to the world and wants to enjoy it. He is reckless and sensual where the father is spontaneous, warm and expressive. He lacks his older brother's commitment. Henry Nouwen who has penned the wonderful book-length reflection of Rembrandt's painting of the son coming home, wrote, "I am the prodigal son. Every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found." I have come to see that in my life. The youngster becomes an outcast and a sinner. Do we feel for him or do we want him to get punished for his misdeeds? Do we see that all of us are wasteful of the Father's gifts? We take the earth and all its gifts for granted. We squander away what is given to us without consideration of those who lack the necessities of life.

Choose your model. Do you want to be like the Father or do you resent his poor lack of responsible parenthood? Do you want to be like the older son and, perhaps truly admire him? Do we really know God loves us and we don't have to earn that love? Are we secure in life or are we anxious about what we have and want more? We live in a culture that blesses greed, consumerism, the need and desire always for more. More money, more things, more comfort.

Do you want to be the younger son or maybe you already are that son? The truth is that our growth in self-awareness usually demands that we have to learn from our mistakes. We have to truthfully become aware of our faults, our denials and ways of covering up the truth. Are we aware that we have poisoned the earth's air, polluted its water, eroded its top soil? Can we relax more and be confident in God's love for us?

Who or what is God? That question needs to be faced. And who am I? Jesus embodies the lesson of the parable. He eats with outcasts. He embraces sinners. He reaches out to save the lost. "All that is mine is yours... We had to celebrate. Your brother has been lost and has been found, was dead and has come to life."

Sing with me. 🎵 "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." 🎵

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