

Today's old testament reading is the story of how Yahweh brought Israel safely across the Jordan. "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt", may be, as some scholars suggests, Yahweh's metaphor in telling Joshua that the safe arrival in the land meant that the disgrace associated with Israel's slavery in Egypt had been undone. Other scholars indicate that the disgrace is meant for the Israelites disobedience against Yahweh. In any case, they had arrived and intent on conquering Canaan. But first, in the verses not listed in today's reading, God commanded Joshua to circumcise all males that were born after the exodus, before any could celebrate in the Passover, the 1st time in 39 years. It was celebrated on the 1st anniversary of the exodus because God commanded them to do so. Some scholars believe that for 39 years, God did not command them until this reading in Joshua. It really doesn't matter. They celebrated at Gilgal.

Then the manna stopped the day after celebrating Passover and they ate the produce of the land of Canaan. This was a new partnership with Yahweh. They relied and had faith in his providing manna and quail every day for 40 years. They appreciated it, but that didn't mean they were happy campers about it all the time. In chapter 11 verses 5-6, the Israelites grumbled about remembering the juicy cucumbers, the sweet melons, the leeks, onions and the garlic. But did they remember their slavery and beatings and mistreatment at the same time? God's promises had been true all that time. The manna had been a stopgap measure, designed to come to an end after the wandering. From now on, they had to raise wheat and barley and forget what a miracle daily bread was. It says they ate the produce of the land.....but whose produce was it? Who planted the seeds? That's for a different reading.

Then we have today's gospel. It does tie in together with the theme of wandering and that our daily supply of food is not to be taken for granted and minimalized as if receiving it means nothing. The definition of prodigal is two-fold: The 1st meaning is "spending money or resources freely and recklessly, wastefully extravagant" That's bad! The 2nd meaning is: Having or giving something on a lavish scale, for example, "the dessert was ooey-goey chocolate and prodigal with whipped cream". That sounds really good! But we have to go with the first meaning as it's perfect for the lesson.

This is probably one of the best known parables, after the birth, death and resurrection of Christ. The younger son of this father, requests his inheritance before his father dies, which is just plain shocking. He is, in effect, telling his father he wishes his father were dead. The elder son would of course get the more generous share, being the eldest and helping to run the estate much longer than his younger brother. It doesn't say what role he had in helping in the family business, but he wanted out. He wanted to go his own way, outside of his father's gaze, rules and commitments. He distances himself not only geographically, but also psychologically and from the community, spiritually. The division begins between him and Dad.

I can only imagine what the elder son thought at the time. Here he is, doing all of the work now that his brother is gone, and upon his father's death, getting the same share of inheritance he would have gotten had the younger son stayed. The division began between brothers. What's even more surprising is that Dad gives him what he asks for, seemingly without question. The son travels to a distant country and spends everything he had on bad choices, sought after pleasures that offered no replenishing or reward. He ended up having nothing and no land on which to develop crops or

animals to reproduce. He is forced to work as a servant on someone else's farm. It is thought to have been a Gentile because he produced pigs. Feeding pigs would be in itself bad enough for a Jew, but to consider joining the pigs at dinner time at the trough is to add degradation upon shame.

So, he knows he's done and needs to go home and he practices his speech, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." Is this real repentance, or was he being manipulative? After all, his dad loved him enough to give him what he wanted, he surely wouldn't actually put him in the fields as a slave. But he didn't really know for sure. He goes home. All this time, and of course we're not privy to how many years, but dad didn't know if he was alive or dead. And of course, his brother didn't care.

As he's coming down the road, still far off, although it doesn't say how far. Does this mean that dad would watch the road every day, hoping his son would return? Did he just get the feeling that he was returning home? In any event, he sees his son and runs out to embrace him, overjoyed at seeing his son alive. His son was home! He did say to Dad, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son," but notice, he left out the part he rehearsed earlier..."treat me like one of your hired hands"! He is restored to full stature of son. Sandals for his feet, for only slaves were barefoot, a ring and a robe, to signify his restoration to the family stature.

Dad then orders a servant to prepare the fatted calf and a joyful celebration to welcome home, his lost son. Everything is going full throttle and then the elder comes home. It's interesting that dad doesn't run and get him out of the fields or sends a servant to get him, instead, the son finds out about the party from a servant after he finishes work. He ain't happy! He refuses to go in and join the party. So, dad goes out to greet the elder and pleads with him to come and join the party. The elder says, "look, I stayed with you all these years, I've been working like a slave for you (which is probably a little dramatic, given how generous Dad is), and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given ME even a young goat so that I might celebrate with MY friends." He doesn't even refer to his brother as brother, he is "this son of yours, who has devoured your property with prostitutes and you killed the fatted calf for HIM!" He reprimanded dad for letting the little brat back in the family without demand for restitution.

Dad reminds the elder that HE is indeed, also, his son, and all that he has, is his. He always has been with Dad. But they had to celebrate and rejoice because "this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." This parable is open-ended. We don't know if the elder had an "ah-hah" moment and realized what dad was talking about. He wasn't being excluded in the celebration. He's going to inherit all that his dad has.

The sympathetic aspects of each of the characters in this parable are heightened by the speech attributed to them. We hear the younger hatching his plan to return home and the elder's anger when he realizes there was a party in his house of which he was unaware — for his inheritance-squandering brother, no less. The contrast between the brothers draws us into the tension between them. The younger travels to a distant land; the elder is faithful to home. The younger indicates he is no

longer worthy to be called a son and prepares to ask to be made into a servant, but in the end, doesn't; the elder describes himself as slaving away and receiving nothing.

The younger was dead and now alive, lost and then found; the elder never deserted the Dad. The younger is the guest of honor at the party; the elder learns about the party from a slave. It is as though the narrative itself tempts us to distance these brothers from one another, inviting us to choose a side, which is the more beloved of the two of them. We must not forget that the father crosses the threshold twice. He crosses the threshold once to welcome the younger son home, and he crosses it a second time to invite the elder son to the party.

Don't forget the extravagance of Dad not only illustrated by his lavish party, but also in his response "all that I have is yours" to the elder son's protests at the of this prodigal party. The father begs the elder to come in and join the younger. And though the younger may be the guest of honor at the party, the celebration is just as necessary for the elder as it is the younger.

I was an only child of parents and never got to experience the birth order dynamics of our neighbors who were mostly good catholic families. He didn't have an estate, we were middle class. My whole childhood was defending the fact that I didn't get everything I wanted, not even a quarter of what I asked for. Oh, I received all the attention, including the negative. I could only blame the cat or dog so many times for knocking over a lamp or for not owning up to a mess on the floor that I was too busy to clean up before going out to play. Chores? I couldn't bribe a sibling to do them for me. I was the one who had to crawl under tables to polish the woodwork. There was no taking turns doing the dishes. My father was in law enforcement, so being a teen in the late 60's, an era that was chaotic in every possible way, I was CONSTANTLY rebelling, proving to others that I was cool like them and challenging my dad to the limits. I made choices that were clearly wrong and I knew it. I rarely asked Dad for advice, at an age where I knew better than he on what those choices meant. Most times turning my back on him when he tried to tell me what would be best for me. Not until my mid-20's did I discover how smart my Dad really was. Some of the challenges were much more challenging for him than for me. But I always knew that I would be coming home to his open arms, forgiven and restored....after an appropriate grounding, but never a party!

So, is this parable about 2 brothers and their dad? Or is it about us and our own relationship with God and with each other? The elder son sat in judgement of his younger brother. He felt he deserved a celebration much more than his brother because he was always there and did the work. Dad exhibited unconditional love and welcomed both sons into his house.

I try to not be judgmental, but most time I fail, miserably at best. Sometimes I find myself becoming a self-righteous mean girl. And that's just not who I am, but I allow myself to be pushed in that direction without asking God for help in blocking that mean girl nasty feeling. Sometimes, when God whacks the 2X4 upside my head, I listen when he says, knock it off, only to do it again.

Part of the reason this story is so compelling and so beloved is because we are never only one of the characters. Who among us has not squandered the love we have been given? By our own parents, or by God? Who among us has not felt the bitter

sting of insecurity and fear at being left out? Who among us has not chased after love, hoping it will be returned? We recognize in ourselves the deep hope and hunger that someone will cross the threshold to come find us when we are lost and will invite us into the party in the midst of our fear of being left out.

I knew 100%, that my dad would always forgive me as a child and crossed that threshold to forgive me. As an adult, I know 100%, that God will always forgive me, no matter my choices, no matter my path, because eventually, I find him again and ask forgiveness, knowing it will be given. I may have said this before, but I look forward to the first day of my eternal life that my Dad, and more importantly, my Father, will cross that threshold to welcome me to the joyful celebration of coming home.