

There was a man with two sons

The 4th Sunday of Lent – Year C – March 18, 2007

Joshua 5:9-12 ✕ Psalm 32 ✕ 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 ✕ Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The parable that we've heard from the Gospel of Luke is known by many of us, as the Prodigal Son. That's not really a very good title. There are three characters named in the story, and the younger son is only of them.

The younger son wanted a couple of things.

*First, he wanted his "rights" without the responsibility. He wanted to get his inheritance "right now" not after his father had died. As the younger son he would have been entitled to 1/3rd of the old man's estate. The older brother would get 2/3rds. But the younger brother didn't want to wait, and he didn't want to hang around. He didn't want the responsibilities of staying in relationship, at least he didn't want *much* of a relationship with either his father or his brother. He wanted his 'rights' and he wanted to be gone.*

Another thing that the younger son wanted was his future. But he wanted it without waiting. He was ready to get on with his life. And not by staying around to work his 1/3 of the family farm. He wanted to cash out and live large for awhile. He wanted his future – immediately. At least he said that he did. We know from the story that his life, actually had no sense of the future whatsoever.

It was just help me feel good today.
Or help me forget today.
Or just help me not feel anything – today.

Not really much of a focus on the future, after all.

Part of my own story is similar to that of the younger son. I often reflect back on my issues with alcohol, and my behavior back when I was drinking, at least what I can remember of my behavior. It's pretty clear to me now, that like the younger son in this story, I wasn't very interested in the responsibilities that go along with being in a relationship.

That's all the more sad, because I was in a relationship. Much like the younger son, my sense of the future was really, very, very severely limited. It only reached as far as the next time I could drink enough to find oblivion.

There's a second player in the drama given to us in Luke's gospel. That's the older brother. We are unlikely ever to meet a more self-righteous son-of-a-gun. When confronted with the news – and worse yet – the celebration – that surrounds his brother's homecoming, all he can do is whine to his father:

*I've always done the right thing.
I'm always here.
I didn't waste my inheritance, like he did!
You should like me best!*

Well, there I am, all over again, in the character of the older brother.

As if my drinking wasn't bad enough on my relationship with my partner Stephen, there were years – literally years – when I played the martyr with my friends. Most people knew that Stephen drank too much. Most people knew that, because I told them. Of course, I never mentioned to anyone that fact that I was an alcoholic myself. It made a much, much better story, if I only whined about Stephen's drinking. I had the self-righteous, long-suffering, faithful martyr story down, pat.

So, we've considered the younger son, the one who wanted nothing, really, to do with relationships. And who claimed, that he wanted his future, now.

And we've considered the elder brother. Who over the years had become an expert at describing himself in the most generous and flattering light possible. Now let's look at the father.

The father had rights too, of course. He had the right to keep his estate intact either until he died, or maybe until he was too frail to take of things himself. But upon the request of the younger son, the father yielded. He gave the younger son 1/3rd of his estate. and the older son, the remaining 2/3rds. We often miss that point in the story. But it's in there. It's not just that the younger son got his share. The father divided the entire estate between the two brothers.

The father also had his own future to consider, just like his sons did. But he gave it all away. The generosity of the father in giving away

his estate *is* striking. More striking than the generosity the father demonstrated with his money, is the generosity he demonstrated with his grace.

After the younger son had jeopardized *almost* everything he had, he began his journey home. His confession and repentance was all worked out. He still thought that he could control everything. But Luke tells us, that while the younger son was still a long way from home, his father saw him coming, was filled with compassion, and ran to meet him. Before the younger son could even get all the way home; before he could finish his confession; and before he could even begin to explain his plan for repentance, the father showered his child with grace.

As the story continues, we know that the father also goes out to meet the elder son. While that son is outside, pouting – refusing to come inside – the father goes out to join him. He calls this oldest son of his to join in the celebration, and reminds him that everything that father has, now belongs to that eldest son.

Making himself an outsider, the father invites the oldest son to take the last thing that the father has to give. His grace.

What more can this son possibly ask for? The father has given his sons everything – everything – that he possesses.

Including the last thing – his grace.

We have one son who asks for everything. Another son who resents everything. And a father who gives everything. A father who

gives everything. Including the last thing he had to give – his grace.

When I looked up out of the pigsty that my life had become, that was the experience that I had. I received grace.

My relationships were restored. My relationship with my health was restored. My relationship with Stephen was restored. And my most important relationship was also restored.

You might think that most important relationship was with God. But that's not the case. As this parable tells us, at least as my own life experience informs my reading, our relationship with God is never at risk.

God is always ready to run towards us. God is always ready to come and find us when we're outside, pouting, in self-exile. The most important relationship that was restored by grace was not my relationship with God.

It was my relationship with myself.

So what should we call this parable? Let's go back to the very first words. That's the best title for this story, I believe.

There was a man with two sons.

A father who had two sons.

A father who loved two sons.

A father who went out to meet two sons.

A father with so much grace that it explodes. It explodes in this parable. It explodes in the entire sweep of our salvation history as we've been given that story in scripture. And most importantly, it explodes in our own lives.

There is plenty of grace – an infinite amount of grace – to go around.

It's critical, I think, to notice that this parable simply stops. Luke doesn't finish the story.

The father is outside – not even at the party that he's hosting – begging the elder son to come inside.

What's the oldest son going to do? Stay outside in self-imposed exile? Or come inside?

And what about that ornery younger son? What's he going to do with the rest of his life?

Abundant, amazing grace is always there – ready to explode in our hearts.

We are invited live into a relationship full of grace.

We are invited to live into a future of grace.

It's up to each of us to write the end of our own stories.

How will the story end for each of us?