

St Pius & St Anthony Homily 4th Sunday of Lent Year C (2025)

Of course we are still in Lent, and I'll keep that focused but the gospel of the prodigal son story reminds me of a common scene we see at many Easter Egg hunts that always seems to play out. Maybe with two brothers or two sisters, one of them being much younger than the other. First the older child runs out and gathers eggs, bringing them back and dropping them in their basket. All the while, the littler child isn't getting the game of it, so the parents urge them on, "Go, Go collect eggs, go get some." And what happens but the little child walks over to big brother's (or sister's) basket and pulls one out, takes it to the mom, and then goes back to the basket getting another and another." That's not the way its supposed to work, and expectedly, the older brother gets frustrated and throws a fit. That may be how the older brother in the parable feels.

Along those lines, how might the father feel about the whole situation of the parable: this example might help us understand his position. Imagine a scene of a little boy standing by a box of puppies, and the parent says "Watch them for me and take care of them". As curious, playful pups do, one of the little pups crawls over the box wall and starts walking around, so the child goes & picks him up, putting him back in the box. In the meantime, another pup sees this wandering and follows suit, scattering out of the box himself (this goes on & on).

I wonder if the Father in this parable feels that way with his sons. Does he feel like he is herding dogs or cats trying to keep everyone on the farm? Just after he finally gets the younger son home, now he has to go back out on to the field's edge again, to call back in, the older son who is upset over the banquet. *(A good question to ask is: What is so upsetting to the older brother? Is it a grudge in his heart that 'one more time, the little brother gets special treatment- getting away with everything'? Or is it greed in his heart, that 'the kid has already spent his inheritance, and now he is eating into mine?')*

Interestingly, we commonly call this parable, The Prodigal Son, but notice how that title aims our focus just on the younger son like a deflection. I find that such a focus protects us, religious folks, because our more likely sin is seen in the older brother. The younger brother sins obviously and publicly, yet he seems to repent and learn his lesson. But with the older brother, he sins too, but its harder to pick out and center our attention on. The younger brother's sin is easier to see in headlines, while the older brother's sin is actually more common and more difficult to face and repent from: it is more a sin of the heart and private. We gain the most ourselves, by looking into the older brother's sin along with our own heart.

Keep in mind that Luke tells us the occasion of this parable teaching: (Lk 15:2) "The Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

But these Pharisees being upset, makes me think ***Jesus has them in view*** as the 'older brother' who sins, too, by their refusal to enter the Heavenly Father's banquet that celebrate the return of the 'lost brother' (Remember that often Scribes, Pharisees and Priests- 'the religious elite'- were also referred to at times in the gospel as 'Elders', as in 'elder brother'!)

For example, in Luke 9:22 Jesus predicted that He'd be 'rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes.' Again in Luke 20:1, we hear about a group challenging Jesus' authority, composed of, guess, "the chief priests and scribes, together with the elders". And in Luke 22:52, we hear about Jesus arrest in the Garden, and it is 'chief priests, temple guards and elders who come for him" So, Jesus has the elders-Pharisees and company (the established religious folk), in mind, in the parable. They are the ones complaining against His gathering in of people (yes sinners-who else?) to the kingdom banquet of God, the Father's farm house! Why are the Pharisees so against Jesus 'welcoming home' sinners? Maybe because they think it is ***their kingdom!***

Back to the two brothers in Jesus' parable, identifying the great sin as being the sin of demanding that the kingdom look like what we think it should look like, and demanding from God what we think should be coming to us: On that level, the level of presumption and greedily claiming everything as our own, the two brothers commit the same sin!

Often commentators make a whole lot of how offensive the younger son's request is, demanding his early inheritance from his dad. It is as if he is saying, "Dad, you are dead to me, give me what's coming, now, and I'm gone". *Like kids arguing over family jewels, when the parent is still laying in the bed sick – the parent may feel like saying, "Excuse me, I'm still here!"* The Father welcomes back the younger son after his exploits, but also the father has to repeat his field foraging, going out again into the field to draw back in the older son too. That move is just as greedy and hurtful as the younger son's rejection of the Father, because the elder brother is only concerned about the son's return now cutting into his portion of the farm. The older son offends the father just as much as the younger son, it is just subtler. The younger son burned through his inheritance, but the older son sounds more like a hoarder. But they both ignore their father's wishes for the family to be together. The Father prioritizes the really important value: not the farm, but the family. To have everyone home together; that is what's worth celebrating, each other! (not the stuff of the farm, but the people)

Of course, we all have to learn this: some learn it the easy way, and some the hard way. I think the father is trying to break through his older son's greedy 'workaholism' as much as he helped the younger son see through his 'partyholism' – Father is trying to tell the older son – your emphasis on accumulating wealth working up to riches is just as alienating as your younger

brother's partying- when your brother hit bottom hard, who stayed with him- not one of those social friends was there to help or feed him? (*recall that the younger son wished to return to farm out of a sense of belonging somewhere again – willing to come back as a simple servant, just to belong somewhere again- those gifts, ring, robe and sandals were family emblems-identity of belonging to others again*). The Father is trying to break through to the older brother to value that belonging-family bondedness- instead of focusing only on the farm estate and his wealth share.

We hope the Father reached the heart of the elder son, but a shocking detail of this parable is that we really don't know how it resolves itself. The parable is left open, with the Father and older son out in the field still, as if this is Jesus, and Luke's way of pulling us into the story. What does the elder brother do, that is you and me, that is Us, what do we do? Do we enter into Jesus' kingdom and welcome with Him those He forgives and restores to His fellowship? Or do we demand that Jesus live by our guest list for his kingdom, only accepting who we want there (*Give me only who I want and no one else!*) Can we be just as exclusionary and judgmental about who God lets back into the kingdom, or on the farm? If certain others are welcomed in, are we tempted to walk out? We have to face that. Both sons turn against their father- one is just more obvious about it. But the parable makes us examine our prejudices about God's grace? The Prodigal son story is a lesson to us all: everyone has someone they would wish to deny into the banquet, or begrudge their presence. The lesson is that when it comes to God's banquet, we ought not worry about who else God lets in, (it is HIS heaven) but we should just be glad God lets us in!