## A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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Jesus' parable of the father and two sons is a development of a storytelling tradition of Israel stories about a father and two sons. The first one is the story of Adam's two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain was offended at his brother because God favored him more. So he killed him. This parable has that same motif. The elder son is offended because his brother gets better treatment than he does. The possibility remains at the end of the parable that he may kill his younger brother.

The story of Jacob and Esau is also a classic story of a father with two sons. Once again the younger son tricks his elder brother, gets his birthright and then his blessing. The younger son must flee for his life. When he returns many years later there is a real possibility that Esau is going to kill him. Esau has mercy on his brother and forgives him. They are reconciled, though they apparently never see each other again after their meeting. At least we do not hear about it.

This parable is in that tradition and ends with that open question: what is the elder son going to do? Is he going to forgive his brother, or is he going to kill him? That is the motif that runs through the stories of fathers with two sons.

Now this parable has been read as a parable about the forgiveness of sinners. Its second part, about the elder son, often is not even told, so that the whole point of the parable is lost. We need to really work at telling the story in a way that will re-create as much of the dynamics of Jesus' original story as possible. I'm going to go through those dynamics in detail and call attention to the ways in which the parable needs to be told.

The story begins with a description of the younger son's demand that he receive his inheritance *now*. This would have been reported by Jesus in a tone of scandal. It was legally possible in the system of the ancient world for a child to request their inheritance. We have evidence of that from the Middle East that Kenneth Bailey has reported. However, while it was legally possible to do this, it meant that the child was hoping that the parent would die and that he wanted to hurry it up. It meant that the child hoped his parent would die quickly. It is quite likely that when Jesus told this he reported the younger sons' words to his father in a tone of arrogance.

It is incredible that the father grants his son's scandalous request and divides his inheritance between them. That was possible for a father to do, but it was really surprising that a father would do that after this offense on the part of the younger son. That's what needs to be conveyed in the tone of how this is reported.

The son then goes and squanders his inheritance in Gentile country. Now this needs to be reported in a tone of offense and when he then runs out of money, of judgment and

critique. "He took his inheritance and he went into Gentile country and he spent it on loose living. Then a famine arose in that land and he began to be in want." So he is getting exactly what he deserved. That's the tone in which this should be told.

That he went and then hired himself out to a Gentile to feed pigs was the height of degradation for a Jewish young man. To be sitting in the pigpen wishing that he could eat the carob pods that he was feeding the pigs meant that he was ritually unclean, totally outside the community and desperate. He had lost everything.

Within that context he reflects on his situation. This is an inside view in which Jesus is describing what was going on in the young man's mind. Its dynamics are those of total identification. There is no tone of judgment here on the part of the teller: "When he came to himself the son said, 'How many of my fathers servants have enough to eat and to spare and here I sit starving. I'll rise and go to my father's house." He is engaged in interior reflection. Notice that it ends with his saying that he will ask his father to make him one of his hired hands because he no longer deserves to be a son: "But would you please take me on as a hired hand?"

The younger son then goes back to his father. The father's response is total compassion. He *runs* to meet him. You can't overdo this response of the father. It is incredible that a father would respond in this way. This response makes it clear that this is a parable about God, because no one in the ancient world would respond to a son in that way. At the very least, one would go with a certain degree of distance in checking out what's behind his return.

The younger son's speech to his father is an action of contrition. It's important to emphasize that he does not ask for anything after his confession, "I've sinned against God and before you and I'm no longer worthy to be called your son." A pause will let your listeners know that he planned to ask to be a hired hand. Communicating this is important in the dynamics of the story.

The father's response is eschatological joy and celebration which should be conveyed in a big way. His tone of one of immense joy. The gifts that he gives are what one would present to a visiting diplomat, as if the son were a king or a royal visitor. So the robe, the ring, the shoes on his feet, and the killing of a fatted calf, were the kind of things reserved for guests who had great dignity and deserved great honor. There were no greater honors that could be given. For this to be done to the son again indicates that this is clearly a parable of the Kingdom of God. This would never have happened in any household in Jesus' time.

The response of the elder son is completely believable. When he comes in and asks the servant, "What is all this music and dancing?" and the servant tells him that his brother has come home, he is angry. The operative norm of judgment here is that he is completely justified and righteous in his anger. Everyone can understand and identify with him more than they can identify with the younger son.

Nevertheless, when he refuses to go in he creates a major offense against the family according to the norms of that time. The father is embarrassed to come out and beg his son to come in and join the celebration, but he does. The older son's response to his plea is very offensive, though perhaps understandable. He does not address his father with any word of honor. He doesn't say "Father," he just begins "All these years I slaved for you..." So he relates to his father as a slave owner and talks to him as if he were a totally unjust person. He expresses his rage in a way that is truly insulting to his father. He goes over the top in his condemnation of his father. The elder son is enraged and Jesus told it that way. The father's voice in response is firm and strong in response to his son's offense. The storyteller, speaking as the father, addresses the audience as the elder son.

It is assumed by Jesus that the audience will identify with the older son, and so the father's closing address is directed precisely to every listener in his audience then and now. The audience is invited to recognize the appropriateness of the father's mercy for the younger brother. I have changed the translation from the NRSV to emphasize that "This your brother was dead and he is alive; he was lost and is found." The gesture at the end of this is a gesture of peace.

The theme of this parable is related to the prayer that Jesus taught his followers: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." The parable invites each listener to occupy that place of being asked, "Will you as the elder son forgive your brother or condemn and kill him?" It ends with a gesture of appeal to each listener as the elder son to forgive.

This is one of the great stories of the biblical tradition and so I would encourage you to break out of the tradition of objective reading that has so often reduced this parable to a theological point. Tell it with passion and energy so that people can experience the dynamic of the Kingdom of God that Jesus addresses here, the centrality of forgiveness. Forgiveness is an essential component of breaking the vicious cycle of vengeance and retribution