



“Come to the Party”

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 NRSV*

Imagine with me a modern rendering of “the Prodigal Son.”

Not long ago, and not far from here, there was a vineyard owner who had two sons. The younger of the two was not what you’d call smitten with the family business and was determined to pursue a career path different from that of his father and older brother.

The younger son shared this unwelcome news with his father one day. The conversation began with the son describing his career plans. He then proceeded to explain the need for capital to launch his new business venture, and to ask for the portion of his father’s estate which he would otherwise receive at the end of his father’s life.

The father was disheartened by the young man’s request, but he saw no choice but to honor it. You see, the father had been around vineyards all his life, and knew that the land and the vines extracted a whole-hearted commitment and a tremendous work ethic, and that if owners did not love the land and the things that grew on it, no amount of intelligence or hired help could ensure the success of that vineyard. So, despite the pain that it caused him to see one of his own chose a different vocation, and despite the significant financial loss that fulfilling the son’s request would exact, the father liquidated half of his assets and gave the boy the proceeds that he had requested.

The younger son deposited the funds into a cash account at a prominent national bank, with a local branch in his area. He obtained a debit card for the account and withdrew some spending money. Then he rented a moving van, loaded his personal property from the family home, and headed east to Vegas, where he intended to launch his new business.

The son’s plan involved parlaying his knowledge of the vineyard into the start-up of a trendy new wine bar and café targeted at the *nouveaux riche* locals and the YUPPY tourists.

Before purchasing real estate or applying for restaurant licenses, the son set up housekeeping in a high-rise apartment complex and did what he called “market research.”

During the day he scoured the business pages to learn more about the local and regional economies and the restaurant and tourist industries. He noted the names of key players and competitors, and he figured out which banks and vendors offered the best business rates for loans and products. Most nights he spent patronizing his soon-to-be competitors to learn from their successes and failures and to determine what niche he would carve out.

The son was happy to mix business with pleasure and told himself that “hitting” on the other customers was “market research.” He figured that, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,” and began embellishing the truth about himself as a means to enhancing his chances of obtaining invitations to the hotel rooms of wine bar patrons.

A few months passed. The son now felt confident about how to start his wine bar and café business. He engaged a commercial realtor to identify a property for purchase. When he couldn't afford the property in areas that he preferred, he sought investors to help finance the deal. The first five bankers with whom he talked turned him down for a loan. Finally he settled on a loan from a commercial brokerage firm. The terms were not attractive, but seeing no alternative, the son agreed to them and the deal was closed.

He hired an architect who drew up plans for the new wine bar and café. He hired a contractor to oversee the project. He applied for the necessary business licenses and engaged a hiring manager to staff the restaurant, while he planned the menu and stocked the wine cellar.

As with all new businesses, there were a number of lumps and bumps along the way. Materials and labor costs soured during the course of the construction project. (We can relate.) The business licenses were harder to come by than he expected. And his cash flow reports looked like architectural plans for a roller coaster.

About six months after the business opened, wild fires spread through the wilderness northwest of Vegas as a result of a severe drought that the region had experienced in prior years. Thick clouds of smoke from the fires drifted into the city, so that air quality was compromised. This natural disaster and its effects on the city made the national news which, in turn, had a negative impact on tourism.

The decline in tourism devastated the Vegas economy. Some of the local customers who frequented the wine bar lost their jobs, and those who didn't, “wined and dined” less often to save money in case such an eventuality came to pass for them.

The son reduced the menu, laid off half of the staff, pawned his personal property, moved out of the condo, and started sleeping on the couch in his office to cut costs and to cover business debts.

Things went from bad to worse. Within a couple of months, he couldn't meet payroll, pay his vendors, or cover his loan payment. The lender called the loan, and closed the business. So the son went looking for work at the big casinos. He had hoped for a job as a sommelier, but the only offer he got was washing dishes on the graveyard shift at minimum wage.

He worked nights, ate food that he scraped from the plates of conventioners, and slept (or tried to sleep) in his car during the days. Given the high cost of living in Vegas, and the garnishment on his wages to cover losses on his business, the son couldn't imagine when he'd have the loan paid off and enough money saved to rent and furnish an apartment. Finally, the thought occurred to him that his father's hired help lived better than he did, and he resolved to go home, admit his mistakes, and beg his father for a job. The following pay day, he gassed up his car and headed home. It took him about two days to get home—all the way home he rehearsed his speech.

Meanwhile, back at the vineyard, no one had a clue as to his plans. The younger son had not been in touch since the day he left home.

The family vineyard was located in a wide valley between the hills just east of us. From the front porch of the main house, one had a clear view of the road in front of the property for about a mile each way. The father liked to begin and end his workdays on the porch. In the mornings, he sat in his Kennedy rocker, sipping Viennese coffee and contemplating the anticipated events of the day. In the evenings, he brooded about how things were going with the family business and wondered what in the world had happened to his younger son.

One late afternoon as he rocked slowly in the chair and allowed his thoughts to drift, he saw a car approaching from the east. It was like something out of a dream. As the driver approached, the father realized that the car was familiar, and that the driver was his long, lost son. He got up from the rocker, stumbled down the porch steps, and met the car half-way down the lane. His son stopped the car and got out, and the father threw his arms around the prodigal.

His younger son blurted out the stream of confessions that he had been rehearsing since he left Vegas. The son started off with a blanket apology about screwing up his life and failing his family, and then begged his father to take him on as a field hand.

The father wisely concluded that there would be plenty of time to discuss employment agreements in the days and weeks ahead. But for now, he just

wanted to celebrate. He sent his son into the house for a hot shower and asked the housekeeper to get the boy a fresh change of clothes. While the boy was in the shower, he went to the tasting room and asked the manager to get out the rolodex. “Call everybody we knew,” he said, “and tell them to come for a barbeque, because our long-lost son is home. It’s time to celebrate!”

It would take a while for the family and employees to pull off a spur-of-the-moment feast, so they started the party with drinks and hors d’oeuvres on the patio, prepared the butane torches, and cranked up the music.

When the elder son, who had been in the field all day, approached the house, saw the yard full of vehicles, and heard the music playing, he called one of the fieldworkers over to his truck and asked what was going on. The man replied, “Your brother is home safe and sound, and your father is hosting a barbeque to celebrate.”

The older brother was furious and refused to go up to the house. One of the hired men reported this news to the boss. The father, in turn, left his guests, walked around the house to the front yard, and began to prepare for a conversation with his elder son, who was pouting in the cab of his Ford F-350.

As he walked toward the truck, the father shook his head, eyed his cowboy boots, and searched his soul trying to figure out where he had gone wrong with his boys. He had somehow managed to raise a younger son who hated the family business and who had blown his inheritance, and he had raised an older son who had no sense of grace and who seemed to think that boycotting a family reunion was acceptable. Where exactly had he gone wrong, he wondered. And what—if anything—could be done to turn things around?

“At least the younger son had the good sense to own his mistakes and come home,” he thought to himself. But the older one was so bull-headed he wondered if an about-face was possible. And what would become of his boys and their brotherly relationship if the two could not reconcile?

When the father reached the older boy, he made a compelling case for the party, but he found his first-born difficult to convince. He reminded his son that all the while that he had been home the two had worked together, enjoyed each other’s company, and shared everything in common. He explained that they would continue to do so now that his brother was home; but that for tonight, they would celebrate, because his younger brother—whom they had given up for dead—had come home alive. “Come on,” the father said. “Come to the party!”

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The biblical version of the parable ends with the father’s invitation to come to the party—an invitation echoing Christ’s invitation to accept God’s grace. Whether

and how we hear this invitation depends on which of the characters that we most identify with in the parable.

I wonder where we see ourselves in the parable. With whom do you identify: the prodigal, the elder brother, or the father?

Persons who have been estranged from family, persons who have slipped into the miry bog of addiction, and persons who have drifted far from God—are some of the kinds of people who have told me that they identify with the prodigal son. When presenting themselves to me, these self-proclaimed **prodigals** have readily acknowledged the errors of their ways, their need for forgiveness and grace, and their desire to pursue a new path.

Persons who were the “good kids” at home and in school, persons who always report early for work and stay late to finish projects, and persons who appear to be self-made men and women—these are the kinds of people who have told me that they identify with the elder brother. During Bible studies on Luke 15, I find that I don’t even have to ask the question, “Which character do you most identify with?” Before I have closed my Bible, invariably some honest chap says, “That parable has always bothered me! I don’t get it. I’m with the **older brother**. I don’t want to go to the party!”

Though less forthcoming than the prodigal-types who readily acknowledge their need for grace, and far less indignant than the elder brother types who don’t see their own need for grace, those who identify with the **father** are often parents, teachers, and pastors. These dear souls empathize with the father, who wonders where he went wrong so that one of his charges would readily “dis” the *family business*, and the other would so readily “dis” a *family member*.

As he approaches the truck, the father strives to assemble his speech, kind of like a football coach headed to the huddle, with his team six points behind on fourth down, with the clock ticking in the final seconds of the game, and knowing that the only play in the book that would give them a chance of winning would be the “Hail Mary.” Or, in the case of the prodigal story, a personal invitation saying, “Come to the party,” which is where Luke leaves us.

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The Parable of the Prodigal Son may be one of the best known parables in the New Testament. Surely no one reading or hearing it misses the point about the prodigal’s need for confession, forgiveness, and amendment of life, nor the offer of God’s forgiveness and grace. That grace abounds for the prodigal is clearly a message inherent in Luke 15, but it is not the only message. There is also an invitation to confession, forgiveness, and grace for the older brother, the father, and ultimately for us.

On first blush, **the older brother** seems to have done everything right. He has carried on the family tradition. He has stayed at home, labored in the vineyard, and executed a total turn-around of a business that nearly failed from liquidating half its assets to satisfy his stupid kid brother.

But upon further analysis, the party invitation and the elder's resistance to it expose us to the complex personality of the elder son. It seems that he is not only loyal and hardworking; he is also deeply resentful of his father's affection for his younger brother, and deeply jealous of his brother's chutzpa.

As it turns out, the older brother resents his younger brother's clear mind and courageous heart in choosing a different path, which reminds him that there were options, and that he did not necessarily have to live his life to please his father.

The party invitation shed light on the older brother's erroneous belief that his father's love was finite, and the invitation challenged him to acknowledge his own need for forgiveness and grace, and to lean into his father's outstretched arms and accept that his father's love was big enough and enduring enough encompass both sons, all the time.

Finally, lest we miss the point that all of us err and fall short of the glory of God, the father character also demonstrates a need for forgiveness and grace. And what was the father's implied confession?

The father's implied confession has to do with acknowledging the limits of his own power and influence. The **father** introduces us to a God who gives us free will, and encourages us to choose how we live our lives. The father figure reminds us that we each choose our path in life, whether we go down the path of least resistance or cut a new path. Some may venture into territory and among characters who will cause us to lose our legacies, while others will choose to stay home and stew in our self-made resentment and jealousies, all the while denying our own voices or our own ability to carve out new paths for ourselves.

To be sure, the story reveals that all three of the main characters stand in need of forgiveness and grace. It also reminds us that God loves us and that God is hosting a "homecoming" party for us right here, right now. At this party, all are welcome, and all share in God's forgiveness and grace.

Friends, there's a party going on, and it's commencing with or without us. The choice is ours. God's invitation stands: "Come to the party!"

What is our reply?