

The Prodigal Son & His Brother

GOD OF THE LOST, THE LEAST, AND ALL WHO LONG FOR HOME, WHEN WE WANDER FROM YOUR WAYS AND WASTE THE GIFTS YOU HAVE GIVEN US, WELCOME US BACK, WE PRAY, SO THAT WE MAY CELEBRATE AND REJOICE IN YOUR PRESENCE FOREVER; THROUGH JESUS CHRIST YOUR BELOVED SON. AMEN.

THE BEAUTY OF A REALLY GOOD PARABLE---IN THE CASE OF THE PRODIGAL SON, PERHAPS THE MOST BELOVED PARABLE OF ALL TIME---IS THAT IT MEETS GENERATIONS OF LISTENERS WHEREVER THEY ARE: EVERYONE HAS A WEIRD FAMILY. EVERYONE HAS AT LEAST THOUGHT ABOUT RUNNING AWAY FROM HOME. AND WHETHER OR NOT YOU HAPPEN TO HAVE ONE YOURSELF, ALMOST EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT A PAIN A SIBLING CAN BE...ESPECIALLY WHEN THERE ARE ONLY TWO OF YOU, SO THAT THE “GOOD CHILD/BAD CHILD” THING HOVERS OVER YOU NO MATTER WHICH ONE YOU HAPPEN TO BE AT ANY GIVEN TIME. FOR THESE REASONS AND MORE, THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON STAYS YOUNG NO MATTER HOW OLD IT IS, GIVING ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE ALL KINDS OF WAYS TO MAKE THE STORY THEIR OWN.

IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN’S FICTIONAL MIDDLE-EARTH, THE HAIRY-FOOTED PEOPLE KNOWN AS HOBBITS HAVE AN INTERESTING CUSTOM. ON A HOBBIT’S BIRTHDAY, HE OR SHE DOES NOT RECEIVE GIFTS FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS. INSTEAD, THE BIRTHDAY-CELEBRATING HOBBIT PRESENTS GIFTS---PERHAPS THROWS A PARTY---FOR ALL OF HIS OR HER FAMILY AND FRIENDS. AT FIRST BLUSH, THIS MAY APPEAR AN UNAPPEALING PRACTICE. WHAT? MY BIRTHDAY AND I GO TO THE TROUBLE AND EXPENSE OF GIFTS AND A PARTY FOR EVERYONE ELSE? THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE MY DAY TO CELEBRATE AND BE CELEBRATED! HOWEVER STOP AND CONSIDER WHAT THIS MEANS IN TERMS OF THE TOTAL NUMBER OF BIRTHDAY GIFTS AND PARTIES A HOBBIT PARTICIPATES IN EVERY YEAR. INSTEAD OF CELEBRATING A BIRTHDAY---“MY BIRTHDAY” ONLY ONCE A YEAR, THE HOBBIT CELEBRATES BIRTHDAYS MANY TIMES A YEAR, IN FACT ON EACH AND EVERY DAY A LOVED ONE...FAMILY OR FRIEND..HAS A BIRTHDAY, THERE’S A PARTY!

THEIR BIRTHDAY CUSTOM SUGGESTS THE HOBBITS MIGHT UNDERSTAND THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON. AS JESUS TELLS IT, A PROSPEROUS LAND OWNER HAS TWO SONS. THE YOUNGER CANNOT WAIT UNTIL DADDY DIES BEFORE HE GETS HIS INHERITANCE. DESPITE THE INSULT, THE FATHER GIVES THE YOUNGER SON HIS SHARE OF THE FAMILY PROPERTY. THE YOUNGEST RUNS OFF TO SOME FIRST-CENTURY LAS VEGAS, SQUANDERS IT ALL, AND ENDS UP EATING BEANS AND MUSH ALONGSIDE THE HOGS HE IS REDUCED TO FEEDING. THEN HE DECIDES HE MIGHT RETURN HOME..EVEN IF HIS FATHER WILL NOT TAKE HIM BACK AS A SON AND TREATS HIM LIKE A HIRED HAND, IT WILL BE BETTER THAN THIS.

SO HOME HE GOES. HE IS BRACED FOR HUMILIATION. HOWEVER AS HE COMES OVER THE HILL IN SIGHT OF HIS HOMETOWN, HIS FATHER RUNS TO GREET HIM WITH OPEN ARMS. THE PRODIGAL CANNOT EVEN LAUNCH INTO THE GROVELING SPEECH ABOUT HOW HE DESERVES NOTHING MORE THAN HIRED-HAND STATUS—THE ONE HE HAS REHEARSED OVER MANY WEEKS AND MANY MILES—BEFORE THE OLD MAN IS WRAPPING HIM IN THE HOUSEHOLD'S FINEST ROBE AND PUTTING A RING ON HIS FINGER. IT IS THE ROYAL TREATMENT, LITERALLY. BEFORE HE CAN BLINK THE TEARS OUT OF HIS EYES, A FATTED CALF HAS BEEN KILLED AND MOST OF THE TOWN HAS BEEN INVITED INTO A SPECTACULAR PARTY. IT IS A SHINDIG OF BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS!

I'M GUESSING FOR MOST OF US, THE STORY WOULD BE PERFECTLY SATISFYING IF IT ENDED RIGHT THERE. JESUS TELLING US THAT THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS LIKE A HUGE BIRTHDAY PARTY. ME OR YOU OR THE NEXT PERSON RETURNS TO GOD, AND GOD CELEBRATES A RETURN FOR EACH OF US. A HEART WARMING STORY.

HOWEVER JESUS DOES NOT STOP THE STORY HERE. AT THIS JUNCTURE HE BRINGS THE ELDER SON BACK INTO THE PICTURE..AND BIG BROTHER IS MIFFED. HE HAS NOT INSULTED HIS FATHER. HE HAS NOT SHOT HIS INHERITANCE ON PROSTITUTES AND GOOD TIMES. HE HAS WORKED HIS LIFE AWAY, DAY AFTER DAY, YEAR AFTER YEAR, AND HIS FATHER HAS NEVER EVEN HOSTED A GOAT PARTY FOR HIM AND A FEW OF HIS BUDDIES. HE IS MAD. HE WILL NOT SET FOOT IN THAT BIG RICH BASH.

REGARDLESS IF WE'RE AN OLDEST CHILD OR NOT, WE CAN RELATE TO THE ELDER BROTHER CAN'T WE? HE IS RESPONSIBLE, HE HAS BEHAVED WELL, HE HAS PRUDENTLY KEPT HIS INHERITANCE SECURE. LITTLE BROTHER, MEANWHILE, HAS SINNED RECKLESSLY AND ENJOYED IT, AND FOR HIS 'PUNISHMENT' IS GETTING THE PARTY OF THE YEAR. DOES BIG BROTHER NOT HAVE A RIGHT TO AT LEAST A LITTLE RESENTMENT?

COULD NOT THIS PARABLE BE CALLED "THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SONS?" WE ALL KNOW THE YOUNGER SON WAS LOST IN A DISTANT COUNTRY, BUT COULD THE ELDER SON WHO STAYED HOME ALSO BE LOST? EXTERIORLY HE DID ALL THE THINGS A GOOD SON IS SUPPOSED TO DO, BUT INTERIORLY, HE WANDERED AWAY FROM HIS FATHER. HE DID HIS DUTY, WORKED HARD EVERY DAY, AND FULFILLED ALL HIS OBLIGATIONS BUT BECAME INCREASINGLY UNHAPPY AND UNFREE. CAN YOU BE LOST WHILE STILL AT HOME? I BELIEVE THE ELDER BROTHER'S ANGER AND ENVY SHOWED HIS OWN LOSTNESS.

THERE ARE MANY OF GOD'S CHILDREN WHO ARE LOST WHILE STILL AT HOME. AND IT IS THIS LOSTNESS...CHARACTERIZED BY JUDGEMENT AND CONDEMNATION, ANGER AND RESENTMENT, BITTERNESS AND JEALOUSY..THAT IS SO DAMAGING TO THE HUMAN HEART. THE LOSTNESS OF THE YOUNGER SON IS SOMETHING WE CAN EASILY IDENTIFY. HIS LOSTNESS IS QUITE OBVIOUS. THE LOSTNESS OF THE ELDER SON, HOWEVER, IS MUCH HARDER TO IDENTIFY. AFTER ALL, HE DID ALL THE RIGHT THINGS. HE WAS OBEDIENT, DUTIFUL, LAW-ABIDING, AND HARDWORKING. PEOPLE RESPECTED HIM, ADMIRED HIM, PRAISED HIM, AND LIKELY CONSIDERED HIM A MODEL SON. OUTWARDLY, THE ELDER SON WAS FAULTLESS. BUT WHEN CONFRONTED WITH THE FATHER'S JOY AT THE RETURN OF HIS YOUNGER BROTHER, A DARK POWER ERUPTS IN HIM AND BOILS TO THE SURFACE.

WHEN I HEAR THE WORD OF THE ELDER SON I HEAR A DEEPER COMPLAINT. IT IS THE COMPLAINT THAT COMES FROM A HEART THAT FEELS IT NEVER RECEIVED WHAT IT WAS DUE. IT IS THE COMPLAINT THAT CRIES OUT: "I TRIED SO HARD, WORKED SO LONG, DID SO MUCH, AND STILL I HAVE NOT RECEIVED WHAT OTHERS GET SO EASILY. WHY DO PEOPLE NOT THANK ME, NOT INVITE ME, NOT PLAY WITH ME, NOT HONOR ME, WHILE THEY PAY SO MUCH ATTENTION TO THOSE WHO TAKE LIFE SO EASILY AND CASUALLY?"

ONE THING I HAVE LEARNED IN LIFE IS THAT COMPLAINING IS COUNTERPRODUCTIVE. WHENEVER I EXPRESS MY COMPLAINTS IN THE HOPE OF EVOKING PITY AND RECEIVING SATISFACTION I SO MUCH DESIRE, THE RESULT IS ALWAYS THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT I TRIED TO GET. A COMPLAINER IS HARD TO LIVE WITH, AND VERY FEW PEOPLE KNOW HOW TO RESPOND TO THE COMPLAINTS MADE BY A CHRONIC COMPLAINER.

THE ELDER SON TEACHES US THAT JOY AND RESENTMENT CANNOT COEXIST. THIS EXPERIENCE OF NOT BEING ABLE TO ENTER INTO JOY IS THE EXPERIENCE OF A RESENTFUL HEART. HIS INNER COMPLAINT PARALYZED HIM AND LET THE DARKNESS ENGULF HIM.

SOMETIMES I WONDER: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE ELDER SON? DID HE FINALLY ENTER INTO THE HOUSE AND JOIN THE CELEBRATION? DID HE EMBRACE HIS BROTHER AND WELCOME HIM HOME? IS THE ELDER SON WILLING TO CONFESS THAT HE, TOO, IS A SINNER IN NEED OF FORGIVENESS? IS HE WILLING TO ACKNOWLEDGE HE IS NO BETTER THAN HIS BROTHER? SO MANY QUESTIONS. WHAT I DO KNOW WITH UNWAVERING CERTAINTY IS THE HEART OF THE FATHER. IT IS A HEART OF LIMITLESS MERCY.

UNLIKE A FAIRY TALE, THE PARABLE PROVIDES NO HAPPY ENDING. INSTEAD, IT LEAVES US FACE TO FACE WITH ONE OF LIFE'S HARDEST SPIRITUAL CHOICES: TO TRUST OR NOT TO TRUST IN GOD'S ALL-FORGIVING LOVE. ONLY I CAN MAKE THAT CHOICE. ONLY YOU CAN MAKE THAT CHOICE.

I THINK THE LOSTNESS FOUND IN THE ELDER SON IS A HARDER ONE TO RETURN HOME FROM. RETURNING HOME FROM A LUSTFUL ESCAPE SEEMS SO MUCH EASIER THAN RETURNING HOME FROM A COLD ANGER THAT HAS ROOTED ITSELF IN THE DEEPEST CORNERS OF ONE'S HEART. RESENTMENT CANNOT BE EASILY DISTINGUISHED AND DEALT WITH RATIONALLY.

ISN'T IT GOOD TO BE OBEDIENT, DUTIFUL, LAW-ABIDING, HARDWORKING, AND SELF-SACRIFICING? AND STILL IT SEEMS THAT OUR RESENTMENTS AND COMPLAINTS ARE MYSTERIOUSLY TIED TO SUCH PRAISEWORTHY ATTITUDES.

CAN THE ELDER SON IN YOU COME HOME? CAN THE ELDER SON INSIDE OF YOU BE FOUND BY GOD'S LOVE AND FORGIVENESS JUST AS THE YOUNGER SON WAS FOUND?

IN THE STORY JESUS TELLS, THE FATHER DOES NOT BERATE AND GET ALL CENSORIOUS WITH THE ELDER BROTHER. NOR DOES HE DEFEND THE YOUNG BROTHER. INSTEAD, HE SHIFTS ATTENTION AWAY FROM BOTH BROTHERS. THE FATHER TURNS ATTENTION TO HIS OWN LOVE AND BOUNTY. THERE IS STILL PLENTY TO GO AROUND...NO ONE WILL RUN SHORT: "ALL THAT IS MINE IS YOURS." THIS IS NOT YOUR YOUNGER BROTHER'S PARTY AS IT IS *MY* PARTY, THE PARTY I THROW FOR MANY. I AM ON THE LOOKOUT FOR ALL MY LOVED ONES, NEAR OR FAR.

BEHIND JESUS' PARABLE LIES PROFOUND AND OVERWHELMING TRUTH ABOUT GOD AND GOD'S KINGDOM. WE HUMANS, WE ARE ALL LOST, MIRED IN SINS, HIP DEEP IN THE PIG SLOP OF ENVY AND RESENTMENT. BEFORE WE KNEW IT, GOD REACHED OUT IN THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL AND THEN IN THE LIFE AND DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS. GOD RAISED US UP AND CALLED US HOME. IT IS NOT JUST ABOUT YOU OR ME, MY SIN OR YOUR SIN. IT IS ABOUT GOD AND GOD'S LIFE-GIVING LOVE AND MERCY. EVERY TIME GOD'S ACTIVE, STRETCHING, SEARCHING, HEALING LOVE FINDS SOMEONE AND BRINGS THEM HOME, IT DOES NOT MEAN THERE IS LESS FOR THE REST OF US. IT MEANS THERE IS MORE. MORE FOOD, MORE FEASTING, MORE MUSIC. MORE DANCING. IT MEANS ANOTHER, AND NOW BIGGER PARTY. MAYBE THOSE HOBBITS ARE ON TO SOMETHING.