

Eric Rennie  
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## THE PRODIGAL SON

If you've been around for a while, as I have, you've probably seen Jesus' parable of the prodigal son play out among your family, friends or acquaintances. In the story, a younger son talks his father into giving him his inheritance early — never a good move, if you remember the story of King Lear. The younger son goes off and promptly blows his inheritance on wine, women and song. Then he slinks back home with his tail between his legs, and all is forgiven.

My father had an expression that bears on this situation. "Shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves in three generations," he used to say. By this he meant that the first generation rolls up their sleeves and works hard to make something of themselves. The next generation blows it all, and *their* kids find themselves right back where the family started from. Shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves in three generations! My father used this expression whenever he felt his own kids were in any danger of backsliding. He was a child of the Great Depression and lived in mortal fear of sinking back into poverty.

My father had grown up on a little dairy farm in Massachusetts during hard times. He remembered having to get up at four a.m. to milk the cows. He would not hesitate to remind us of this whenever we complained about having to do our chores. My grandfather had been determined to make a better life for his three sons. All of them were sent to Mount Hermon Academy on full scholarship. My father was valedictorian of his class. He went on to Wesleyan University here in Middletown, again on full scholarship. Again we was valedictorian of his class. He wound up with the Ph.D. in economics from Harvard. He retired as a senior executive at Nationwide Insurance, where he managed their investment portfolio.

As it happened, my father had a brother who dropped out of college and wound up as a milk man working for my grandfather. My uncle lived in a ramshackle house just down the road from my grandparents. There was an old car jacked up on cinderblocks in the front yard. To talk to him, you'd never suspect he had graduated high school, much less gone on to college. My father seemed as mystified as anyone by his brother's downward mobility — and I think it scared him.

The parable of the prodigal son is not an exact fit for my family situation. My uncle was the older son, not the younger. As far as I know, there was no early inheritance for him to squander. But after he nosedived, my grandfather did take him back in, even though my grandfather had a reputation for being a bit of a hard case.

To me, the striking thing about the prodigal son parable is that it's really three different stories bundled into one, with each dependent on which of the three main characters you identify with.

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There's the story of the prodigal son himself, who blows his inheritance and winds up feeding pigs as a hired hand in another country. (Pigs, of course, were regarded as unclean in Israel and unfit for human consumption.) When the prodigal son comes to his senses, he decides to return home and hope his father will take him on as a hired hand. He knows he is a wastrel and doesn't try to deny it. He tells his father, "...I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." That to me is a positive sign. The prodigal son makes absolutely no effort to justify himself, which is what the gospel account means when it says he "came to himself."

Now we come to the story as seen from the older son's point of view. I found it striking that Jesus paid so much attention to the older son, since the parable would have worked just fine with only the prodigal son and his father. However, the older son is the one I identified with. I was the oldest in my family, worked hard and mostly did as I was told. My younger brother was not a wastrel. Still, I thought I had it a lot tougher than he did — a dynamic I've seen play out with my own kids. The lesson of the parable, of course, is that the older son really loses nothing by his father's benevolent treatment of his brother. He still has his inheritance and his place in the family.

Now we come to the story as seen from the father's point of view. I may identify with the older brother in the story, but I also understand where the father is coming from, since I have two sons of my own. Once you become a parent, you see things differently. You realize that while you may love your children equally, it's impossible to treat them exactly the same. Each child has different needs and responds to you differently. One of my kids was near the top of his class. He was popular with his classmates and a good athlete to boot. He required relatively little heavy-duty parenting, certainly far less than the other one, who often struggled. Yet it was the one who of necessity got the most attention from us who felt disadvantaged. Go figure!

The parable of the prodigal son is a story of redemption. The father, of course, represents the heavenly father. Here was his son, this wastrel, who had squandered his inheritance and consorted with prostitutes. And all the father can think to say is, "...this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Do these words sound familiar? How about "Amazing Grace": "I once was lost but now am found"? "Amazing Grace" was written by a man named John Newton, a former slave ship captain. If there is any category of humanity more degraded than slaves (through no fault of their own), it's those who enslave them. Yet John Newton found redemption and became an Anglican priest. He had "come to himself," to borrow language from the parable of the prodigal son.

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What does it mean to come to yourself? Do you suddenly realize your true identity as a child of God? Not exactly. First you must acknowledge that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” as St. Paul put it. You have to come to the painful realization that you are a wastrel — or whatever it is you are that falls short of the glory of God. Maybe you have squandered your inheritance and now wish you could eat the slops you are feeding the pigs. Maybe you lead an existence even more degraded than the slaves you are transporting to the New World. Maybe you’re just an ordinary churchgoer who has sinned in thought, word and deed. Whatever it is, that’s you through and through.

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded by drunks who believed you had to hit bottom before there could be true redemption. You had to stop kidding yourself. You had to stop believing that maybe you drank a bit too much but could quit any time you really wanted to. You had to be able to stand up in front of other people and admit, “I am an alcoholic.” You had to admit you were powerless to stop drinking on your own. In Christian terms, you had to admit you were a sinner — no more bullshitting yourself (pardon my French).

In the parable of the prodigal son, it was the older son who felt disadvantaged because his father killed the fatted calf to celebrate the return of his younger brother. The reality was that the older son was disadvantaged, although not for the reasons he thought. If the older brother was truly secure in his position, he would have celebrated along with his father. But he couldn’t. He was jealous of the guy who fed slops to pigs.

The older brother was what my Jewish mother-in-law used to call an allrightnick. He did all the right things; he went through the motions. But his heart wasn’t in it. He was like the drunk who kids himself that he can quit any time he wants to. He would be far better off if he could bring himself to say, as his wastrel brother did, “Father, I have sinned.” The prodigal son may have failed miserably in life. But he is still ahead of the game, because he has finally come to himself and has taken the first essential step toward redemption.