

The Prodigal Father

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Lectionary: Galatians 5: 1, 13-15, 22-23 Luke 9:51-62 2 Kings 2:1-4, 6-14

Welcome! I am Asher. Maybe you've already heard some of our story in town by now. It was just about ten years ago when my younger boy, Benjamin, got this idea in his head. He was restless around the farm, always getting into arguments with his brother Seth, and with me, too. That boy did everything he could to avoid work. I remember once long ago when I needed a job done, and I asked Benjamin to do it. He said, "Sure, Dad, I'll take care it in a little while," but then he never did. So later that day I asked Seth to do it, and he refused me outright. "No! I'm planning to meet my friends. Make Ben do it! He never does anything around here!" But then I guess Seth changed his mind, and soon he got it done. Come to think of it, I don't believe I ever even thanked him.

Anyhow, about Ben's big plan. Let's see - he was 26 then, so Seth would have been 30. I remember he sat down beside me on that bench outside there under the sycamore tree, and he got this serious look on his face. "Dad," he said, you know you're not getting any younger, and you've said that when you die you plan to divide up the property between Seth and me. Well, I was wondering . . . how about if you give me my share now, so I can show you what I can do with it while you're still alive. I want you and Mom to be proud of me, like you are of Seth. You're rich - you have so much that you could let me have my share and still be fine." So I said OK.

What was I thinking? Which is exactly what my wife asked me later on that evening. "How could you be so *prodigal* with our money?" I had to go look it up. It means "recklessly extravagant." Well, I suppose I was, but it didn't seem that way to me at the time. See, I was thinking, "Here's a chance to let Ben make his own way in the world." And I confess I've always had a soft spot for that younger boy of ours. So, he left Nazareth here, and headed off to make his fortune in the big city. He sent us letters from Sebaste, and then from Jericho, and finally from Jerusalem. Then the letters stopped. Occasionally I would run into somebody who had passed him in the street down there, but sometimes months went by with no word. We were worried sick about him, but managing the farm kept me busy at least.

Well, maybe you've heard this next part of the story from the local gossip - it's the part they usually tell - so I'll keep it short. It had been about two years, when one day I was out on the land and I saw this figure coming up the road. He was stooped over and moving slowly, but I recognized Ben's walk. I dropped whatever it was I was doing at the time and ran to meet him. He was skinny and filthy; wearing rags, and said something about being one of my workers on the farm. I was just so happy and relieved to see him home! I walked him back to the house, had the workers clean him up and get some new clothes on him, and we had a celebration! Now when Seth found out, he was livid, but I managed to cajole him inside to join us.

That's just the beginning of our story, really. Did you ever wonder what happened after that? It's been eight years since that day, and Ben is still living at home. He blew his whole inheritance and doesn't have a penny to his name. He still doesn't like working much, and as you can imagine, Seth is always on his case. And the guilt trips from his mother - Oy! It's been a challenge for me to figure out how to love them both, such different boys. Seth, he's super responsible, and I need to let up on him some. He's critical enough for both of us, hard on himself and on everybody around him. He gets that from me, I know, and I don't need to add any to his judgmental brooding. I just wish he would learn to lighten up on people. I guess when you're a harsh taskmaster on yourself, those expectations spill over onto other people as well. I should know. It's been my demon all my life. I still can't believe I made such a bad decision when Ben asked for the money that day. What was I thinking?

So ever since it's been a daily challenge to decide how we should be with Benjamin. He doesn't take much initiative around here, and doesn't seem to have any realistic plan for his future. I love the boy and want the best for him, and he makes me so mad sometimes that I can hardly see straight. The wonderful forgiving father running down the road - that's the story you hear, but that day didn't begin to prepare me for the next thousand, or for the thousand days after that.

My late friend Joseph, he also had very different sons. The eldest became a rabbi, and the four who stayed home are just as different as can be. When his older boy, Jesus, came home for a few days last year, he surprised us. We had heard about him doing miracles and we wanted him to do some for us, but he wouldn't or couldn't, or at least he didn't. Instead he just talked to us, and I don't know where he got it from - certainly not from Joseph or Mary - but there was a quiet wisdom in him. You could feel it. Somebody asked him which law is the most important, and he said it's to love God, and love our neighbors like we do ourselves. Now, it might not be such a good idea for me to love other people like I do myself, because like Seth, I'm not all that loving toward myself, but I guess I know what he meant. Treat other people as you hope they'd treat you: with patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity.

They say that I forgave Benjamin that day out there on the road, but the truth is that I'm still forgiving him. How many times do I have to forgive him? I keep thinking he's going to change, and I guess he has in some ways, but just when I get my hopes up, there's the old Ben again. We knock heads and snap at each other. He wants money for this or that, and I just want to say, "Look, you *had* your chance!" Then I think of how many chances I've missed to do the right thing.

It's a long road that we're on. I guess I hoped that when I welcomed Ben back home, some miracle would happen and he would turn his life around. That's what I still hope for. I suppose that must be the way our extravagant God feels about us. "Maybe if I just put them in a really beautiful garden with everything they need! Maybe if I arrange an escape path for them right through the middle of the sea! Maybe if I bring food raining down from heaven and water out of a rock in the desert! Maybe if I just send this next prophet to talk to them . . ." Dayenu. It *should* have been enough, but it wasn't.

Oh, Mary got a letter the other day from *her* oldest boy. He told her that he's going down to Jerusalem, and so she left to go meet him there. Jerusalem - the city of peace. I sure hope that he fares better there than Ben did.