

Lent 04 C 2019 02
March 31, 2019 :: Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32
Father Jim Cook

“Which Story Will You Believe?”

The parable of the prodigal son is a favorite story for lots of people, myself included. And I think it’s because the more you look at it, the more you can see, and the more you can learn. And it’s like a big story filled with lots of smaller stories. But even those smaller stories can be really important, because sometimes they can intersect with our story in really interesting ways.

Now, when I talk about “our story,” a *person’s* story, I’m talking about the story people tell themselves about themselves. It’s that interior dialogue buzzing around inside our head. And, sometimes, that dialogue may include some really positive things that we say to ourselves about ourselves. But frequently, that inner dialogue can be quite negative, and quite dark.

For example, the younger son in the parable has a story that he tells to himself. And we get to hear a portion of that story after he had wasted his inheritance, and fallen on hard times. And as he is heading back home in shame, he’s rehearsing the speech he’ll give to his father. And, in it, he is saying that he’s “no longer

worthy” to be his father’s son. *That’s* the story this younger son is telling; that’s what he believes about himself; that he’s worthless.

Now, I want to pause for a moment, and share with you the fact that this younger son’s interior story resonates with me. Because I’ve been where he’s at more times than I care to admit. And maybe it’s the same with you. And maybe that’s the reason this parable of the prodigal son is so appealing, because it seems like it’s talking directly to me. Or to you.

Anyway, back to the story. The younger son is heading home, feeling worthless, and trying to hold on to the faint hope that maybe, just maybe, there can be a job on the farm for him.

So it must have been a big shock when, after he’s arrived at home, but before he can even finish his speech — before he can tell his story about himself — it must have been a big shock that his father demands that the best robe be brought for the son, and a ring placed on his finger, and sandals for his feet. Shocking, because robes and rings and sandals are signs of son-ship.

And though the younger son has decided — and undoubtedly believes in the deepest reaches of his heart — that he *can’t* be his

father's son anymore, that he's not worth it, his father tells a different story. And it's a story about return, and reconciliation, and redemption; that it's *possible* to be a son once more.

And so, now, the younger son has reached a crossroads. He has to decide which version of his story he's going to believe: *his* story about himself, or *his father's*. Is he going to believe the story that tells him that he's worthless? Or the story that tells him that he is a robe- and ring- and sandal-wearing son; who was dead but is alive again; who was lost but has now been found? Which story he will believe? Which story he will trust?

As it turns out, it's the same for the older son. He too has his version of his story, and we hear it when he returns from the fields, learns about the reason for all the celebrating, and tells his father, "For all these years, I've been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours..." — and he *can't* even say his brother's name — "...came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted *calf* for him!"

Wow! There's a lot of content in his version of his story. And a lot of anger. A lot of resentment. So, let's unpack it a bit.

First of all, in his version of his story, the older son says that he's working like a *slave* for his father. That's how he describes life in his father's household: as a slaving away. But everything else we know about the older son directly contradicts that verdict.

Second, he says his father has never even given him a goat, to feast on with his friends. Well, as with apologies to all the goats in the world, it's the older son's way of saying that he thinks his father is cheap.

And third, and perhaps most galling, the older son claims that his father has dealt with his younger son by an entirely different set of standards. He thinks his father is unfair. He thinks he's been wronged. And he's furious about it all.

Now, I'll just pause for a moment, and say, I've been *there* too. And I know exactly how that older son is feeling. But enough about me.

So, in response to hearing the older son's version of his story, the father offers *his* version of his older son's story, with this simple sentence: "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." And with just those words, the father manages to tell an entirely different story about the older son.

First, the older son *hasn't* been a slave. He's the landowner's heir-apparent. And he could have *done*, or *not done*, anything at anytime. And if he's been slaving away, it was his choice to make.

Second, the father *wasn't* cheap with him. Because, and again as the heir-apparent, he could have *had* anything he wanted, at any time. Including a fatted calf.

And, third — and this is the surprising, and oftentimes shocking, twist that Jesus always seems to include in his parables — the father explains that *he never set out to be fair with either son* in the first place. Because it's in the very nature of grace and generosity to be *unfair*. And the father sees, in the younger son's return, another chance to practice this divinely radical *unfairness*. Of course, the younger son doesn't deserve a party; but that's the *point* of the party. And that's how things work in the father's world; it's filled to the brim with unfair grace, and unfair

generosity, and unfair welcoming, and unfair acceptance. In other words, it's a place where people get what they *don't* deserve.

And the decision that the older son has to make, is the same decision that the younger son had to make: will he trust his own version of his story, or his father's. Who will he trust? Who will he believe?

You might have noticed that Jesus ended this parable with a bit of a cliff-hanger. Because while we know which version of his story the younger son chose to believe, we don't know which version the older son will believe.

I think that part of the genius of this parable is that, by the time it ends, we-the-audience have been confronted with the fact that, maybe, just maybe, *our* version of *our* story — the things we say to ourselves about ourselves — may not jibe with *God's* version of our story.

And if that's the case, what are we going to do about it? Whose version of our story are we going to believe? Which version are we going to trust? And this choice is no small matter, because God loves us more than we often love ourselves.

You see, to reject God's version of our story, is frequently to condemn ourselves — and I'm speaking again from my own experiences — is to condemn ourselves to a sort of hellish existence. Because, in that instance, our stories about ourselves can never be any larger, or more expansive, or more hope-filled than what we limited mortals can conjure up. And it's an *awful* existence.

But to accept God's version of our story, is to see ourselves through God's eyes. And from *that* vantage point, we may be able to glimpse the limitless possibilities that only God's grace and love can imagine. In God's version of our story, we are loved and we are lovable. In God's version of our story, there is nothing we can't accomplish. And in God's version of our story, we are his children, and he is our Abba, our Daddy.

Which version of our story will we choose to believe? Which version will we trust? May God enable us to choose wisely.

Amen.