

Trinity 9 (2023)

There is no shortage of great short story writers. Names like O. Henry, Guy de Maupassant and Edgar Allan Poe come to mind. Another name that belongs on this list is Jesus of Nazareth.

Indeed, Jarred Wilson in his book *The Storytelling God* ranks Jesus as the greatest of the great. He writes: **“Once upon a time a king came to earth to tell stories, and the stories contain the mystery of eternal life.”**

Wilson’s thesis is borne out in the **Parable of the Prodigal Son** recorded in today’s Gospel.

This story gives us a glimpse into the very heart and mind of God . . . the God who is represented by the father who runs out to meet the returning son. Some have gone so far as to suggest that this parable should be called the **“Parable of the Running Father”**.

Why? Why is this detail so important?

Well because men of wealth and position in those day did not run. It was a breech of decorum.

Acting in this manner would have been the cause of great consternation . . . just as when Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt, the First Lady of the Land, would run down the driveway of the White House to meet her friend Mary McLeod Bethune, a black educator. The two would then walk arm in arm into the mansion, again, to the amazement of anyone looking on.

The running father in the story Jesus tells would have brought forth the same response.

This detail reveals that the God revealed in Jesus does not delight in the death of a sinner but revels in his return. This God is for us and not against us.

Perhaps you grew up with an image of a very different God . . . a God who was a stern, despotic disciplinarian, one who was always ready to pounce, perhaps with something like a celestial fly swatter in His hand.

“You cross this line, and I’ll get you!” He calls out from His seat on high.

As flawed as this image is, there is some truth in it. God is unalterably opposed to sin. In the words of Habakkuk 1:13: **“Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity.”**

But this is not an arbitrary aversion. Rather, it is because going contrary to God’s precepts hurts, maims, distorts and finally destroys those He loves, His imagine-bearing creatures.

But God does not blow evil out the water, nor did He create a race of robots that obey

mindlessly. Rather, He gives – at least in the case of our first parents – freewill.

He therefore respects our choices and stands at the gate awaiting our free return.

Actually, that image does not do full justice to what God has revealed to us about Himself.

The image of the waiting father in this parable is balanced by another in the two parables which immediately precede it: the **Parable of the Lost Sheep** and the **Parable of the Lost Coin**.

In these two earlier parables, we discover that the Waiting God is also the Pursuing God. He takes the initiative in calling men and women to Himself and bring them out the far country.

More than that, He appoints a place where justice and mercy meet and kiss . . . a place He

can be just and the justifier of those clearly in the wrong. I am, of course, speaking of the cross, the place of atonement, which has been defined as at-one-ment.

The waiting God, the pursuing God, the dying God points us in the self-same direction: **God is good and loves mankind.** He is for us and not against us. His arms of mercy are ever extended in our direction.

Perhaps you have gone into your own ‘far country’. In that case, this parable of the loving, running Father is for you.

It points you to the path you should take. In the words of an old Gospel song, **“Ye who are weary, come home!”**

Before I go further and move to the other characters in this story, I should probably set this parable in context.

Jesus came announcing the Kingdom or reign of God, a theme which would have been familiar to anyone knowing their Hebrew scriptures.

The expectation was that at some point in the future, God was going to do a new thing. A new King out of David's royal line was coming. All wrongs were going to be put to rights, and God's righteous rule would extend from sea to sea. Jesus came saying, **"The time is now!"**

At the same time, He began staging a party to celebrate its arrival. But there was just one problem, the wrong people were showing up . . . people like tax gatherers and sinners of sorts. At least this was the take of the scribes and Pharisees.

As far as these religious leaders were concerned, the people with whom Jesus was celebrating were beyond the pale. They should be left alone, left outside.

But that was not happening. Instead, they were flocking to Jesus and having their lives turned upside down . . . better still, turned right side up!

Inclusion including transformation was happening. Matthew, the one who is credited with writing the First Gospel, is a case in point. He started off life as a tax gatherer (one in the employ of the Roman occupiers of Palestine) and was at his booth plying this trade when Jesus found and called him. But he did not stay there. He left and followed Jesus.

Were the Pharisees and scribes happy about what was going on under their noses? The ‘unclean’ being invited in? No, they were anything but . . . they were resentful and hostile.

Almost certainly Jesus has these religious leaders in mind when he crafts the character of the older brother in this story.

That's the background. But what might you and I take away from this parable? /// No doubt many things, but let me point out three that might be particularly helpful.

First, we should pay attention to what drove the younger brother to make the return journey home. It was **trouble, adversity**.

Remember when he got there, he was flush with cash and was having a grand old time, but then things changed dramatically. Three things happened:

His credit card was cut off. A famine arose in the land. His fair-weather friends went away. And so, he landed in a pig sty . . . not a good place for a Jew brought up on the teachings of the Law to be, but there he was.

But it was trouble that brought this young whippersnapper back to reality. Psalm 119:71 perhaps says it best: **“It is good for me that I**

have been in trouble; that I might learn thy statutes.”

A few verses earlier, the psalmist says something similar: **“Before I was troubled, I went wrong; but now have I kept thy word.”**

My point is: God can use trouble. He can and does take our bad decisions and the consequences that follow and weaves them into His ultimate plan for good, our good. So, don't despise trouble. Don't let it lead you into despair but back to God and your true land.

That's the first thing we can take away from this parable. Another involves not delaying making the trip back.

Once this young man realized he was in the wrong place, he did not go and seek to negotiate a better deal with the pig farmer in whose employ he was. Rather, he got out of there. Surely there is a lesson here for us.

There is danger in tarrying. If you wait for a more convenient time, you may grow complacent, accept your fate, and not make the trip back.

“Today, if you will hear his voice, harden not your heart,” says Psalm 95. ////

Recapping: from this parable, we learn:

First, trouble can be a good thing if it causes us to ‘come to ourselves’ . . . to wake up and come back to God and our true country.

Secondly, delay is dangerous. ‘Today’ is the operative word.

But there is third and final lesson we can learn from this parable. That is: **There is something of the elder brother in all of us.**

That is, it is easy for us to become critical of others who have done worst things than we have

and to write them off . . . to discard them as rubbish.

Jesus' story of the elder brother reminds us not to engage in this type of thinking and behavior. This older boy did not realize it, but he too needed to come home to his father . . . not in terms of making a physical journey but a spiritual one.

So, in closing, let me ask you: Have you written anyone off? Judged that one unworthy of God's forgiveness and grace?

If you saw that person in church, would you be unhappy? Call him a hypocrite or worse?

If so, you may well be an 'elder brother'. We all are at times, I dare say.

The Father who runs points us in the opposite direction. In the words of the hymn writer Frederic Faber:

“There’s a wideness in God’s mercy . . .

“There’s welcome for the sinner and more
graces for the good.”

“There is mercy with the Savior,
there is healing in his blood.”

That’s the Gospel, my brothers and sister.
Good news for ourselves and good news for
others. Receive it and share it.