

The real prodigal: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

by [A. Katherine Grieb](#) in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

"A man had two sons . . ." was a common way to begin a parable, especially one comparing good and bad sons. Matthew uses it to contrast one son, who promises to work in the vineyard but never shows up, with another, who at first adamantly refuses to go to the vineyard but later repents and goes (21:28-32). Which one did the will of his father, asks Jesus? Not the one who talked a good game, but the one who actually followed through with obedient actions.

Whether or not Luke had some version of Matthew in front of him as he wrote, he uses the same opening formula, precisely to subvert the expectations encouraged by its literary genre. Luke, master storyteller of the New Testament, knows exactly what he's doing here. First Jesus' opponents articulate the same binary logic suggested by the opening formula; then Jesus tells a parable beginning with that formula that proceeds to blow binary thinking right out of the water.

Let's see it in slow motion. The Pharisees and scribes are stakeholders in correct interpretation and observance of the Torah. From the beginning of Luke's Gospel, Jesus has been shown to come from a family that is Torah-observant and is obedient to the law himself. However, Jesus, in the tradition of Israel's prophets before him, has been in almost constant conflict with religious leaders, in an ongoing family argument about the larger purposes of the law in God's plan. Luke describes the Pharisees and scribes as grumbling, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Even before we hear their complaint, Luke has already identified them with the rebellious wilderness generation that murmured against Moses, Israel's greatest prophet. Narratively, we are set up to expect that whenever the Pharisees and scribes complain about Jesus' actions, they are wrong.

But don't they have a point? Isn't a righteous person, especially a teacher, seriously compromised by table-sharing with sinners? As readers, we find ourselves knocked off balance. Then, before we can quite right ourselves, Jesus tells us a parable about a man who had two sons.

It is said that there are two kinds of sinners in the world: those who know they're sinners and those who don't. It is tempting to reduce this parable to a lesson that even notorious sinners can come to their senses, repent and find their way home, while those who think they have never left home refuse to see the subtler sins of pride and self-righteousness by which they exclude themselves from communion with God and prodigal brothers and sisters. This reading interprets the story by means of another Lukan parable, the Pharisee and the tax collector, told to some who considered themselves righteous and despised others.

A related strategy reads this story of the man with two sons through the Pauline grid of slavery and sonship (see Gal. 3:19-5:1), which already sets the two sons of Abraham in binary opposition. Translated into Luke's story, the younger son who relies on faith (not having a work to stand on) is contrasted with the older son, who obligingly describes himself as a slave. ("Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command.") Both of these reading strategies, however, rely on the good son/bad son literary convention which Luke himself seems to be subverting. Indeed, one of the challenges of preaching this parable is to avoid reduction, the flattening of Luke's complex narrative and the rich interplay of his characters into stereotypes of our own imposing.

One way to avoid the good son/bad son dichotomy is to focus on only one character and one part of the story. The lectionary's pairing of the parable with Psalm 32 invites such a strategy. After all, Luke gives us an extended "inside view" of the younger son as he envies the pigs their food and comes to himself, saying, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger." We watch him resolve to return ("I will get up and go to my father"). We hear him confess ("Father, I have sinned against heaven and you"). We witness the downward spiral of disobedience ("While I kept silence, my body wasted away") and the moment of evangelical conversion ("Then I said, 'I will confess my transgression to the Lord,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin"). Again, as powerful as this preaching strategy is, we sense that something of Luke's own complex purpose is missing.

What happens if we focus on the man who had two sons and read this parable as an answer to the question the Corinthians might have asked Paul: What does it mean to be an ambassador for Christ? How does God make an appeal to someone, through us, to be reconciled to God? Read this way, the parable models grace-filled

responses—to the teenager who says, “You’re the worst parent in the world, I wish you were dead!,” to the awkward penitent, to the passive-aggressive rule keeper.

Jesus’ parable requires discernment beyond human ways of thinking, discernment of the new creation that compels the ministry of reconciliation. The scandal remains: We become the righteousness of God only because for our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin. As Karl Barth saw, if Jesus himself had not left the Father and traveled into the far country to share a table with sinners, we would still be there, eating those pig pods. Shouldn’t Christ’s ambassadors also request a table in the sinners’ section?