

Winning situation: Joshua 5:9-12; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

by [Beth Sanders](#) in the [March 6, 2007](#) issue

As we move deeper into Lent and its emphasis on repentance, spiritual introspection, self-examination and self-denial, many of us choose to practice Lenten disciplines. If we have become involved in the season's imagery and expectations, we may find ourselves reading biblical texts from a spare and minimalist perspective. When we read the familiar Lukan parable of the Prodigal Son, for example, we may be especially severe, heaping further epithets on the one we call prodigal: he is wasteful, we say, and reckless, dissolute, uncontrolled. If our spiritual resources are running low from our Lenten disciplines, and our emotions running close to the surface from the stress of fasting, we may identify with the elder brother. We cannot tolerate the young son's abuse of a cherished inheritance. We cannot understand why he did not respect and appreciate the gift of inheritance, especially when his acceptance of it suggests that he prefers monetary gain to a relationship with his father. We tend, especially if we ourselves feel restricted, to believe that there is only so much blessing available, and that we should be careful to allocate it appropriately.

When we do this, we are thinking of life as a zero-sum game in which one person's gain or loss is exactly balanced by another's losses or gains. In this mind-set, the total when all gains and losses are calculated is always zero. It is impossible for both players to win. Cutting a cake, for example, is zero-sum because taking a larger piece reduces the amount of cake available for others. Children are subject to the emotional challenge of the zero-sum theory, especially when two sibling players are vying for pieces of cake offered by the parent, who controls the "global profit or loss."

When I was a child, my mother did not allow many sweets in the house, so we children relished any opportunity to eat dessert. Our grandmother once sent my sister and me a box of Little Debbie Swiss Cake Rolls. I was about 12; Catharine was two, and eating in a high chair at the dinner table. The treats came two to a package, so one night we opened a package and each took a roll. As is typical of a two-year-old, Catharine ate hers immediately, focusing intensely on that one

moment of pleasure in the sweet gift. But I held onto my half and anticipated the pleasure. I told my parents about something at school, gesticulating with the cake roll in my hand, waiting to savor it when the time was right. This was more than Catharine could bear. She saw the cake waving in front of her, and before I knew it she had grabbed it and stuffed it into her mouth. Mother wouldn't open another pack, so I was left with no dessert—and Catharine was left with a smiling, chocolate-and-white-frosting-covered mouth. Storing my treasure meant that I didn't get to enjoy it, while Catharine enjoyed the gift wholeheartedly, confident that if she needed more, it would be provided.

When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they came to rely upon God for a daily provision of manna as well as for all that was needed for their spiritual life. But as they entered Gilgal, they began to eat the produce of the land to which God has brought them. In the old wilderness way of life, scarcity had taught them to eat sparingly because there was just enough manna to sustain life. But now they lived in non-zero-sum abundance as a community of people able to exercise their own control over what they ate. When they celebrated the Passover, they remembered God's abundant blessings and mighty acts of deliverance as a win-win situation for everyone.

In a December 2000 interview in *Wired*, President Clinton said:

The more complex societies get and the more complex the networks of interdependence within and beyond community and national borders get, the more people are forced in their own interests to find non-zero-sum solutions, . . . win-win solutions instead of win-lose solutions. . . . We do better when other people do better as well—so we have to find ways that we can all win.

We are part of a culture and world in which resources are limited. They require conservation, and the use of one resource by one party limits its availability to another. We tend to think that like natural resources, God's love and forgiveness are similarly limited. Like the brothers in this parable, we fail to comprehend that the Father's bounteous material gifts and love are available to all without limit. The younger brother believed that squandering his share of the inheritance meant that no more would be available upon his return; the older brother believed that because of his sibling's careless spending, his inheritance and his portion of their father's

love were irretrievably diminished. Like them, we expect a zero-sum game, but we must remember that it is not so with God's love.

Sharon Ringe suggests that the title for this lesson should be the "Parable of Two Beloved Sons." Whether we view the story from the younger or the older brother's perspective, the result is the same. The younger brother sees his father squinting as he watches his beloved son approach, then runs to embrace him and pardon him for everything that has come between them. The elder brother has his father's abiding presence, a share of all he possesses, and the joy of celebrating their love in daily life. With God, as with this earthly father, there is no end to the love. This is not a zero-sum game but a win-win situation.