

Surprise party: Sunday, March 25

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [March 14, 2001](#) issue

Maybe it's just my imagination, but has the parable of the prodigal son become something of a bore lately? I know, I know, this is one of the most beautiful stories of grace in the Bible. And yes, I know this is a powerful archetype of human redemption. And yes, this parable presents a picture of divine acceptance so radical and sweeping that it has sometimes generated astonishment and provoked sputtering outrage.

But the shock value has worn off. Just say the opening line, "There was a man who had two sons," and we know where this one is going. The story has all the bland predictability of a biblical theme park. The awful, relationship-shattering words, "Give me my share of the inheritance," leave us unruffled because we can already hear the musicians tuning up for the joyful dance jig at the end. We are untroubled by the son's anguished lament, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son," because the aroma of fatted calf roasting on the spit wafts over the narrative, and covers up the fetid stench of the pigsty. Fear not; the boy is coming home. He always does. The road back from the far country is paved and well lit, and we have traveled it many times.

But the power brownout in the prodigal son story is not just the result of overfamiliarity. Countless repetitions have transformed what was once a parable with trap doors and mysterious and unexpected depths into an Aesop's fable, an anecdote with a prosaic moral tag. Instead of knocking our socks off with the surprise of the father improbably hiking up his skirts and dashing down the road shouting for joy and calling for "A robe! A ring! And sandals!," the story coos a little cultural wisdom in our ear: "Hey, no matter how badly you have messed up life, pick yourself up. A ready supply of forgiveness is waiting, and you can start over where you left off." The prodigal son becomes the "Comeback Player of the Year," and, as *Hartford Courant* columnist Jeff Rivers notes, "Everybody comes back. Marv Albert

came back. Hugh Grant came back. Mike Tyson came back, Marion Barry came back. . . . It's a forgiving culture."

Taken this way, though, the story becomes a predictable piece of self-help advice. Once the boy lifts himself up out of the muck and heads home, the rest of the plot locks into place. The father is obliged, like a cuckoo in a clock, to show up at the right time with the party hats. There is no other choice. The boy, after all, is really, really sincere, and he is making a comeback. He "is due" his celebration.

Luke, however, will have none of this. In fact, to preserve the shock of this parable, he wires up an electric fence just a little way back. The story of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) is a mirror image of the prodigal son. Here, too, a brother demands his share of the inheritance, but this time the answer is no. Here, too, there is an economic emergency, but this time the crisis is not famine but abundance. Again there is a festive party of eating and drinking, but this time the guest of honor is not a bankrupt son being embraced by a generous and joyful father but a rich fool who thinks he can throw a party for his own soul. Luke so badly wants us to see the pictures of undeserved grace and unexpected joy in the prodigal son that he leaves the negatives lying around as clues. In God's economy, he practically shouts, you cannot throw your own party.

When we treat the prodigal son as a comeback story, we miss the point. When we say, "Head home, God's feast is waiting!" we misunderstand. It is not our remorse that forces God to set the banquet table; it is not our deep desire to start over again that leads God to roast the fatted calf. We cannot throw our own party. By all rights, this story ought to end with the younger son sweating in the furrows, eating in the slave quarters and spending his days serving his older brother. So if we prodigals see the father running in our direction with open arms, we should know in our souls that this as an event so unexpected, so undeserved, so out of joint with all that life should bring us, that we fall down in awe before this joyful mystery.

A student of mine went jogging with his father in their urban neighborhood. As they ran, the son shared what he was learning in seminary about urban ministry, and the father, an inner city pastor, related experiences of his own. At the halfway point in their jog, they decided to phone ahead for a home-delivered pizza. As they headed for the phone, however, a homeless man approached them, asking for spare change. The father reached into the pockets of his sweat pants and pulled out two handfuls of coins. "Here," he said to the homeless man. "Take what you need."

The homeless man, hardly believing his good fortune, said, "I'll take it all," scooped the coins into his own hands, and went on his way.

It only took a second for the father to realize that he now had no change for the phone. "Pardon me," he beckoned to the homeless man. "I need to make a call. Can you spare some change?"

The homeless man turned and held out the two handfuls of coins. "Here," he said. "Take what you need."

We are all homeless prodigals and beggars. So head home, but expect nothing. Be astonished beyond all measure when the dancing begins, the banquet table is set and the voice of God says, "Here. Take what you need."