

The prodigal and the unreligious

By [Tom Johnson](#)

March 11, 2010

In response to the religious leaders' concern that Jesus was welcoming and associating with clearly unreligious people, Jesus told stories about God's attitude toward such wayward folk, as we find in [Luke 15](#), from which this week's Gospel reading comes. God sees such people as lost and won't give up until God finds them and [brings them home](#). They also apparently must want to be found and not be lost anymore. When this happens, God is very happy.

God will often let us go our own way and learn from [our experience](#). Today's helicopter parents lack such love and trust. They want to stay in whatever control they think they have, constantly texting their kids and making comments about everything they do—control masked as love. God's love gives up control, even though God never ceases to watch and love and hope. God knows we have to grow up and discover a genuine, responsive love that's not based on guilt or dependency.

We start out life in a "[give-me](#)" state of being. We are not even aware that we are self-centered, all about ourselves, impatient to break whatever ties that bind and chafe. We are fortunate indeed if there are people outside our families who tell us that the world does not revolve around us and that other people are not there for us to use. We are blessed if we come to a nadir where no one gives us anything, where we have exhausted all our resources, where we have failed completely and (this is the miracle of divine grace) can admit our failure to ourselves.

The lost and very unreligious son "came to himself"—his three-o'clock-in-the-morning self, as one of my friends calls it. He could see himself and his life clearly ("O wad some Power the gift tae gie us, to see oursels as ithers see us!"—Robert Burns). With clear self-knowledge, he knew what to do. No deus ex machina, no helicopter parent arriving to intervene and pick him up, to find him or give him bus fare. Rather, he began the sometimes long, personal and painful journey home to the one whose child he was. He knew his real identity, however unworthy of it though he [felt himself to be](#).

Instead of the contract that he had in mind, the unreligious son found a father of [steadfast covenant love](#), a parent not interested in relative worthiness, guilt, retribution or ceremony (except the ceremony of celebration)—the trappings of religion—but in new life, new beginnings and joy.

This is how God feels about today's unreligious people, even antireligious people. God never stops believing in them and hopes they one day will come to their best and truest self, even though some elder siblings and religion-invested preachers may make it [almost impossible to see](#) the loving eyes of God.