March 30, Lent 4c (Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)

There is no resolution to the prodigal son story, only the resonance of the father's words.

by Peter S. Hawkins in the March 2025 issue
Published on March 24, 2025

The preacher's challenge with the remarkable parable of the prodigal son—certainly one of the greatest stories ever told—is deciding where to focus. So many options! Does one start with the red flag of its opening line: "There was a man who had two sons"? If so, we are subtly reminded that this is an old, old story. It is also a problematic one, for from the beginning of scripture Genesis is rife with sibling rivalry and the countercultural preference of the younger over the elder. Think of Abel and Cain, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers.

Or might one shift gears and note how Luke frames all three parables in chapter 15 by placing them within the dynamic of Jesus' early ministry? Imagine his audience made up of "tax collectors and sinners" on the one hand and religious leaders on the other. How can he eat with the former and bear the constant reproach of the latter? More to the point, will these folk ever sit down together?

Or does the preacher offer an analysis of each of the parable's brothers that will speak to the inevitable sibling conflicts known firsthand within the congregation? Surely in almost every family there will be the beloved "bad" child who is welcomed home after their latest major mess, as well as those others (no doubt better represented in church on Sunday) who always obey the rules and resent never being thanked adequately for their dependable virtue.

Looked at in any light, both brothers in the parable are recognizable and unattractive types. The younger asks for his inheritance while his father is alive, travels far and spends disgracefully, ends up with nothing to eat but pig's food, and finally decides to go back home where he can at least expect to be fed like a hireling. A gifted rhetorician even at death's door, he prepares a carefully contrived speech to be delivered upon his return. An empty belly, not remorse, sends him

back to his father.

The elder is all resentment and rage, turning not so much against his ne'er-do-well brother as against the father who refuses to act like a proper patriarch. Think of the scene reported to him by the household staff. The father has scanned the horizon and at last seen the bedraggled one on the road. He is so filled with "compassion" at the sight—the noun *splanchnizomai* describes a gut-level yearning—that he forgets all decorum by taking off on a run, hugging and kissing the miscreant, interrupting his well-rehearsed speech, and calling for a treasury of gifts. Quickly, no less, bring a robe ("the best one"), a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. Then for the pièce de résistance of a celebratory meal—get ready the "fatted calf"!

That delicacy turns out to be the last straw for the elder. Listen, he says, I have worked like a slave, never disobeyed a parental command, never asked even for a minimal party with my friends. But when "this son of yours" shows up—after doing God knows what with God knows whom—you spare no expense and go for broke!

This is indeed the case, but look at what he fails to note. To begin, just as the father runs toward the younger son to welcome him home, so he leaves the feast to plead with his other son to join in. Nor have they ever been estranged. They have always been together, and indeed the elder is sole heir to the estate: "all that is mine is yours." Furthermore, now addressing his firstborn as *teknon*, "beloved boy," instead of as the more neutral noun *huios* used elsewhere in the parable, the father in effect verbally caresses his filial accuser with a term of endearment. He also transforms the elder's repudiation of his sibling ("this son of yours") by forging a connection between them, calling the younger, "this brother of yours," thus bringing them together. Finally, the father reminds everyone within earshot of the high stakes involved in these events, not once but two times. It is necessary to celebrate, he says, "because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

Unlike the preceding parables of coin and sheep, there is no resolution to this tale apart from the resonance of the father's repeated words, no reported rejoicing in heaven over the restoration of one who was lost. Nor do we know whether either brother is transformed by his experience: their future together is a blank. Instead of a happy ending, Jesus conjures an open-ended fiction in which a paterfamilias extends forgiveness and with it offers what Paul speaks of as a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). In the face of loss and death, Jesus offers the possibility of reconciliation

to be discovered only if everyone at odds comes into the feast, the “bad” and the “good” alike.

The story poses a choice: Will you come inside or not? Once there, with whom will you sit down and eat? It may well be a matter of life and death.