

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This weekend's Gospel is a familiar one. It is popularly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. However, some have named it the Parable of the Prodigal Father. The word *prodigal* is not commonly used in popular American English except as connected with the parable. It is an adjective that describes someone who spends money or resources freely, recklessly, wastefully. What has motivated people to call the father *prodigal* is his mercy! The father pours out his mercy freely, recklessly, even wastefully. Let's look at the parable.

The younger of the two sons is unhappy with his life. He is impatient, and, in essence, tells his father that he wishes the father were dead... he can't wait for his inheritance. When a priest in the Holy Land started to share this story with a couple of young Muslim boys, one of the boys immediately said, "His brother should have killed him right on the spot for having said that to his father." This points to a very different culture than our own here in the United States, and gives us a much better understanding of the culture to which Jesus was speaking. For the younger son to say this, it was incredibly disrespectful to his father, and would have shocked the hearers of the parable. And yet, Jesus says that the father did not smite his son, but gave him the inheritance, and let him go.

After "running on empty" for some time, the boy comes to his senses and turns home. The Gospel tells us,

**While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.** (Luke 15:20)

Note a couple things about this part of the parable: the father caught sight of him "while he was still a long way off." That means that he was looking for him, waiting for him, gazing upon the horizon, hoping against hope that his son would return. Another thing to notice is that he doesn't wait for his son to come to him; rather, he throws away his dignity, and runs out to his son. This is what love does!

After the son gives his half-hearted confession, the father says,

**Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.** (Luke 15:22-24)

This indicates that the son was *not* going to be a hired hand, but the father restores him as his son again.

What great mercy!

Then there's the older son. He has worked tirelessly for his father, but refuses to come into the feast. When the father comes out, he gets angry with his father. When referring to his brother, he says, "your son." The father says to him,

**My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.** (Luke 15:31-32)

Note that the father says "your brother," trying to reestablish the relationship between the brothers. Also note that the father goes out to meet his older son, in much the same way that he went out to meet his younger son.

Of course, the father in the parable is God the Father, and we are the two sons. Jesus is showing the incredible mercy that God the Father is willing to pour out, and how far He is willing to humble Himself. When we spit in His Face, like the younger son did, saying that we only want what will give us short term happiness, God doesn't refuse nor does He "smite" us for the insult. When we are far away from Him, He is constantly watching and waiting, hoping for that day when we will be open to relationship with Him. As soon as we turn in longing for Him, wanting to turn from our sin (even for the selfish reason of hunger), He runs out to meet us. His grace pours out in superabundance on us as soon as there is just a crack open to Him. When we return, He embraces us and returns us to His family as son or daughter. Even if we're like the older brother who is resentful and upset because he doesn't have his own way after years of fidelity, God the Father comes out to meet us where we are and wants to restore our relationship with Him and with those around us.

What wasteful mercy God pours out on us! We don't deserve it. Most times, we don't even care about it, as we go along in our little sinful, self-centered lives... and yet He continues to waste His mercy on us. God does not tire of forgiving; it is we who grow tired of asking for forgiveness.