

A Tale With a Twist – based on Luke 15:1-3 and 11b-32
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
March 14, 2010

Page 1 of 7

This is one of the best known stories the gospel writers have given us.

This story sticks with you. At least it does for me.

It's up there with the Good Samaritan –
and even the birth of Jesus as stories that are remembered.

We usually call it "The Prodigal Son."

When we give it that title – it seems to be about one main character.

And yet – it's really a story about three persons –
or types of persons - a father and two sons.

If you have been around Christian story-telling very long -
you have heard it – or read it - many times.



But have we really heard it?

And - how we might engage with it today?

Can we hear the story again – with new ears?

For a couple of thousand years – these stories we call parables -
and ascribe to Jesus - were usually described as allegories.

Allegories are narratives where the characters
and actions have other meanings.

Allegory was used extensively in Roman and Greek mythology.

If we are reading an allegory we ask – "What does it mean?"

What do the characters represent?

With these stories we do something else too.

Before we really think much about what it means -
we connect emotionally to the story.

See if you find this true of yourself.

For example - there may have been times
when we have had to go back and say to someone
we've made a mistake and let them down.

Or – we have had such an experience as a parent.

Or – we are asked to forgive
when we have extended ourselves to another
who squanders our resources in some way.
That’s the way we get emotionally involved in the story.

We get into that before we can even ask the question -
What does it mean?

Then - we can go ahead and consider
how the early Christians listened to the story.
Because - the early Christian movement did some reshaping of the story and added the allegorical
content to it:

The father becomes God.
The younger son becomes the Gentiles.
The elder son represents the Jews – or the Judeans – or the Pharisees.

The elder son was always there and cherished by the father.
But now the other son - the Gentiles -
were now welcomed into the family – into the tribe.

This would have been important when the followers of Jesus
were making their case to their fellow Judeans
that the Gentiles could be welcomed.



This is quite different than our early emotional reactions – isn’t it?



And then about a hundred years ago –
readers began to challenge this way of reading parables.

They quit asking – “What does it mean?”
And they began to ask – “How do we listen?”

The younger son wants to leave home.

And – in an insulting way –
asked his father for his share of what would be his inheritance.

The father - knowing there was no point in trying to hold on -
agrees and shares the money he has - with both sons.
Mind you – this was advised against in the Old Testament -
giving the inheritance to children before you die.¹

Anyway - the younger son leaves home and lives a life of extravagance.

An economic depression hits the country where he is living -
and the younger son is soon broke.

He takes a lowly job to try and survive.

But he finds out this kind of life is pretty hard.

He wants to go home.

He has to figure out what to talk to his father -

The father – has always been watching and waiting and loving.

He sees his son – and runs out to meet him.

He welcomes him back with an extravagant homecoming party.

The elder son – after a hard day's work – also goes home -
and finds the party in progress.

He is told it is for the younger son – who has now come home.

He takes offence – yells at his father - and refuses to go in to the party.

As with the younger son – the father goes out to meet him.

After a short and heated debate
between the father and the angry older son
about feelings and property and power - the story ends – unresolved.

The younger son is still inside enjoying the party.

That's our story.

But – a parable is a tale with a twist.

A father has two sons.
He not only - had two sons – he loved two sons -
and was generous to two sons.
He does not reject either son – under any circumstance.
His love is given to both – not to one at the expense of the other.

And here is the gem in this story:
This is what I want you to take with you.

Love does not resolve the conflict.
Love accepts conflicts as the arena
in which the work of love is to be done.²



With this in mind -
Parables scholar Bernard Scott says that there is a missing third act.
Remember – there is a brother outside sulking.
The conflict between the brothers is unresolved.



What happens next?³
In family therapy (and in my training as a pastoral counselor)
we used to talk about “scripts”
as if they are scripts in a play that become memorized.
Different family members take on – different roles.
Families can set up “scripts” that go from generation to generation.

If these sons continue with the “scripts” they have so far –
they are headed for a collision. Aren’t they?

One may end up killing the other.
And that takes us back to the beginning.
That takes us back to the beginning of the big story in Genesis -
with Cain and Abel.
Hopefully – humanity has moved forward since then.

And if that is a possibility - they can follow their father's script.

They can surrender their egos and keep on welcoming –
accepting – and being with the other.

These brothers have a choice.

And so do we - when a story like this touches our lives.

Sometimes we need to find new scripts in our families.



The story doesn't tell us much – if anything – about Jesus.

But – it does help us make sense of who Jesus was -
and how people remembered him.

He was so in touch with – what we -
most of the time – are not in touch with – that divine thing.
And he shared that "in-touch-ness" with his listeners in parables.

Bernard Scott says that Jesus was "a rebel who revolts in parable."⁴

Parables create a counter-world -
a hoped-for world – a re-imagined world.

Or - perhaps it's the real world.



Think about another story from Luke -
when Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth.

In that story Luke suggests that no one -
not even the so-called "God's people"
should ever think of themselves as privileged.

This did not go over well – as you know.

There may be a tie here – between these stories –
when we become overly righteous.

When we adopt an exclusivist attitude - we miss blessings.
Closed hands – closed minds – closed hearts
are seldom bathed in divine energy.

A Tale With a Twist – based on Luke 15:1-3 and 11b-32
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
March 14, 2010

Page 6 of 7



Sometimes we set up and accept social norms -
like confusing wealth and status with personal fulfillment.
Don't we know that in this valley?

That would not be the only one.
What kind of issues does it raise for you?
When does the offence of this older brother –
connect with anything in your life?

Do you ever miss out on the blessing
because of a closed hand - or closed mind - or a closed heart?

Open minds – Open hearts – Open doors
There may be more meaning in that phrase used by the
United Methodist Church than it seems on the surface.

For me this week – it gives me pause
to think about when I have been closed minded
or set in some way that I am not open
to what God wants me to have or to know.

That may not apply for you – but it does for me.

The twist in the parable is that it offers another way
to think about - for one thing -
how we live in families – or how we are part of communities.

Listening to the parable is like looking at
or listening to an alternative approach -
or a glimpse – or a whisper of a potential –
that will take us to a place of fuller – happier lives.

A Tale With a Twist – based on Luke 15:1-3 and 11b-32
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
March 14, 2010

Page 7 of 7

Jesus re-imagines the world for us -
helps us see it in our mind's eye -
so that we might be able to live into it.
Parables call us to keep our imaginations alive.



Let this one work on you as you leave here today.
And let your imagination take you to places
of hand and mind and heart – where mercy flows -
whatever the situation you are in.
And see what happens.
Amen.

¹ Ecclesiastes 33:22

² Williams, D. D. *Spirit and Form of Love*. 1968

³ Scott, B. B. *Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parable of Jesus*, 2001 as adapted by Rex Hunt

⁴ Scott, B. B. *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, 1989 as adapted by Rex Hunt