

March, Year One
Reflection Three

Church Calendar – Lent
8th Day Value – Incarnational Community
Life Practices (Spiritual Disciplines) – Prayer

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) The Older Son

The youngest son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son certainly represents the “sinners” in Jesus’ day, those whom society had cast out and marginalized. They were the “lepers” of the culture, both figuratively and literally. There is, however, another son in the story. This is the older son, who comes to the celebration from the fields and unexpectedly hears of his brother’s return home.

Again we can ask questions of the text. How old is this older brother? What exactly are his responsibilities in this culture and context, and what are his unique privileges? In what ways does his reluctance to accept the younger brother’s return have to do with his inability to forgive his brother for the shame brought on their family? What does someone like the older brother have to do to realize that following the rules is not a requirement for the Father’s love?

These are just some of the questions that come to mind when considering the older brother’s story. In fact, in this culture, the older brother (we can assume he was the first born) has had many privileges that the younger brother never received. Just by his birth order the older brother has a unique responsibility for the father’s estate, the blessing and expectation of carrying on his father’s reputation, and the privilege of power and position. Yet this does not matter to the older brother as his jealousy and anger take control of his life.

The older brother sees the grace his father shows to the younger and cannot come to terms with it. By all accounts the younger brother should be dead, either by his own choices or by the father’s own hand. But the Father’s act of mercy turns everything upside down. Now the older brother also has the choice to turn and repent. Will he welcome his brother back in love and kindness, or will he love his rules, his position and his power more than another human being?

When the older brother refuses to join the banquet and the celebration the father has thrown for the younger son, he is showing contempt toward both his brother and his father. Here the older brother is doing exactly what he hates his brother for doing. He, too, is shaming his father in front of the whole village. The father comes out of the banquet (another humbling act) and pleads with his older son to come in and celebrate, for his brother has been found. The older brother’s reply is scandalous. He calls his brother his father’s son, thereby cutting himself off from relationship with his brother and insulting his father in front of the invited guests. Will he consider entering the celebration of life? Will the older son enter into a world of grace where love, not rules and legalism

compels conduct? We don't know. The story ends there and we are not aware of any happy ending.

Certainly, the Pharisees and the ruling religious elite in Israel knew that Jesus was talking about them when he described the older son. Jesus was deliberately inciting a confrontation with these men, the upper-class of Israel. Now, he asks us the same question. Are we like the older son (or daughter), unable to accept that despite our privilege, power and position, we are far short of the kingdom? Do we not realize there is only one class of people in God's economy, namely the powerless? How are we to come to God as older sons, who may have the more difficult choices to make in order to surrender ourselves and our accomplishments to God? What are we to do with the bitterness that has walled off our hearts to reconciliation and celebration?

Readings

Gospel Reading – The Gospel of Luke

- For this third month, read the entire book of Luke if you can, spending some concentrated time in Luke chapter 15 – especially the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Remember to read slowly and prayerfully; pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal fresh insights that settle in the heart and mind.

Old Testament Readings

- Read Exodus chapters 1-4. These chapters are the short biography of Moses – from birth to death. They also describe the deliverance from slavery of the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt. Moses is “chosen” of God to lead a new nation. Jesus, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, is likening Himself to a new Moses, delivering all people from exile, into a new kingdom.
- Read Psalm 91 – This psalm is a song of Moses, praising God's deliverance and mercy.

New Testament Readings

- Read John chapter 2 – This chapter describes Jesus' first recorded miracle at the wedding celebration at Cana. Here, Jesus transforms ritual cleansing into a feast of salvation and new life and celebration.
- Read Philippians chapter 1 – This chapter is an opening pastoral prayer for the Philippian church and for each of us as we enter into prayer.

Questions and Reflections

- As you study and mediate on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, what does the older son represent to you?
- The 8th Day Community's first value describes ***Incarnational Community***. This means we “flesh-out” Jesus' love for humankind's brokenness by caring for and living with the marginalized and oppressed and concerned and active in the causes of justice. We model this in communal prayer and decision making by creating an atmosphere of trust and authenticity. Describe how you have been instructed by the Holy Spirit in community.
- ***Celtic Christianity was centered in Community***. This community life was inspired by their love for the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Within community they encouraged one another to have ***anamcharas***, soul friends and guides. What would it mean to you to have soul friends and guides and to be a soul friend with another?
- ***This winter season of “Nurturing” focuses on Lent***, the forty days of preparation before Easter. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, Lent is a time of giving up something or fasting. How do the Beatitudes relate to the season of Lent, the Cross and Resurrection?
- ***Life Practices #1 (spiritual disciplines) (first year) – Prayer***. This season we practice and emphasize *Prayer*. Praying is dialogue with God, sitting in silence to listen, talking with God in our favorite places of worship and beautiful places of meaning to us. We may pray as a group, corporate gatherings or during special calls to prayer and intercession. We may pray the *Daily Office* and/or *Complines* in the evening and center that time in the Church lectionary with the help of a prayer guide such as the *Book of Common Prayer*, *Celtic Daily Prayer* or other helpful guides. Prayer is praise to God, an intimate meeting of love and of wonder, bathed in mystery. It is important to keep in mind that daily prayer – prayer at all times and in all places – can help us see Jesus in the most ordinary of circumstances. Prayer is a creative gift to be used and grown within community. We also commit to a daily rhythm of prayer as we confront the evils of our times and the opportunities provided to us for witness (Matthew 6:9-14).
- ***Quotes to Ponder:***
“Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on in the path of God's commandments, our hearts over-flowing with the inexpressible delight of love.”

St. Benedict of Nursia, founder of the Benedictine Order,
The Rule of St. Benedict (written circa 560)

Personal Reflections

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