

You are
Luke 15:11-32
February 3, 2008

(Scripture reading: video clip of the parable of the prodigal son from *Godspell*)

That's not quite the way Jesus told it!

But it is the same story. Part of the virtue of Jesus' parables is that they invite retelling and embellishment and playfulness. You don't "figure out" the meaning of a parable. You experience it. You live it. You tell it and embellish it and play with it until it becomes yours. Or until you become part of it, until you enter into its way, into Jesus' way, of looking at things.

You tell it and embellish it and play with it: changing the scenery, renaming the main characters, imagining a different ending, "trying on" for yourself the different parts ...

You are the younger son ...

You're in trouble. You're in deep trouble. You acted impulsively. You acted foolishly, and now you're paying the price. You wanted to go out and grab life by the horns, but life grabbed you by the *** and shook you and beat you and left you lying limp at the side of the road. You may still be young by the count of your years, but you feel old and tired and used up.

Most of it is your own fault. Not all of it, but most of it. You put yourself in dubious situations. You put yourself around dubious people, people who cared about you only as long as you could do something for them, which, of course, is only fair, because you cared about them only as long as they could do something for you!

You really only cared about yourself. You really only cared about getting what you wanted -- right now. You didn't think ahead. You didn't think. You didn't think about the consequences of your actions and you certainly didn't think about anybody else.

You left your family behind. You left your father behind, taking advantage of his generosity, but shrugging off his affection. You turned your back on him ... but you have never forgotten him.

It's true, you have hardly given a thought to him. You haven't thought about what he must be thinking or feeling or doing. But you have never forgotten him. You never really doubted his love for you, even as you used it and abused it and said you didn't need it.

And that's why you're headed home now. You don't know what kind of reception you'll get. You don't know what sort of shame and humiliation you may have to endure just by showing your face around that house again. You don't know what he'll say.

But you trust him. You trust him to do the right thing by you. You know you will be safe there, at home, with him, whatever happens.

You are the father ...

You see your younger son coming home. He has been away ... for an eternity! He left you. You let him go.

You gave him everything, everything he asked for: his share of the inheritance, his freedom. And he left. He left you, and you have heard nothing from him and nothing about him since.

You gave him everything and he gave you grief in return: grief and spite and ingratitude. He embarrassed you and humiliated you and scorned you and broke your heart.

And now you see him coming home. There, on the road, in the distance, you see him coming home. Will you welcome him? Will you run to him and embrace him and welcome him home with joy?

Of course, you will!

You are the older son ...

You are the older son, aren't you? You're the good child, the dutiful child, the responsible child. You have not embarrassed your father. You have never left him. You have not squandered your inheritance or your life.

You have made good choices. You have worked hard, taking care of business, taking care of the family, taking care of everybody else, not just yourself. You have done everything you believed your father expected of you.

And that's what makes this so hurtful. He took him back! He hugged him and kissed him and threw this big welcome home party for him as if nothing had ever happened! How can he be so gullible? How can he give his love away so easily and so thoughtlessly?

And what does it mean if he does? Doesn't all your hard work amount to anything? Doesn't it matter to him that you have always stayed, that you have always served him, that you have always respected his wishes? After all you have given up for him, why doesn't he show you that kind of love? You deserve it! Your brother doesn't!

Your father takes you for granted. You are almost invisible to him, the son who is always there, just part of the scenery. He doesn't love you the way he loves your brother. He doesn't love you ...

But he does! He has always loved you. Not more than your brother, and certainly not less. He has always loved you ... both. But you both have been fooled by what you believed.

Your brother believed that loyalty and fidelity and responsibility and unselfishness and patience were stifling him, keeping him from happiness, keeping him from personal fulfillment, not realizing that it is just those things that bring true happiness and true fulfillment.

And you ... you have always believed that love had to be earned. You have worked so hard and stayed so close to home and watched your behavior so carefully because you have so craved your father's love and approval, not realizing that you have had both his love and his approval from the beginning and all along.

He honors you and commends you for your loyalty and fidelity and responsibility, but it is not for these things that he loves you! He loves you, as you are, however you are, because you are. Because you are his child ...