

It has been said that everyone loves a good redemption story. This Prodigal Son parable from the Gospel of Luke certainly puts that statement to the test. Jesus tells it to the Pharisees as a response to their frustrations with him over dining with sinners and tax collectors. The assumption being that the Pharisees don't approve of redemption without suffering or retribution.

The touching element of this parable is that there are many characters with whom one might identify. Perhaps you have been the young son, longing to "get off the farm" and live a life of excitement and adventure. Maybe you have been that parent who has chosen to allow your child to make a decision that could very well lead to self-destruction, simply because you knew that we must allow our prodigy to find their own way. It is my hope that if you identified with the younger son- who eschewed Jewish culture and tradition in asking for a liquidation of pre-inherited assets, only to lose them in a pattern of poor choices- I pray that you received the same embrace of love and welcome that the downtrodden son found upon his humbling decision to come back home.

In my experience, many Christians might identify as the younger son or father but choose to act out of the emotions of the older son in the parable. Jesus insinuates that the Pharisees should see themselves in the bitterness of the older son who challenges his father over the welcome and redeeming of a son that not only abandoned the family but didn't obey. The echoes of 'It's not fair!' resonate as we hear these words, "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you...yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends," in verse 29. I find the use of the word *slave* telling. Obeying and serving God shouldn't be interpreted as enslavement.

One might argue that the reciprocal nature of obeying God and receiving blessings or entitlement is a dynamic laid out for us in the Old Testament. Punishment for turning away from God is held in balance with the favor of God as expressed by the accumulation of land, livestock, and family, battles won, and independence granted. Therefore, the righteous who obey should receive the reward before the children that turn away from God's open hand. If we welcomed the sinner without retribution, what would that say about the steadfast who serve without reward? (This is where we cue God's response to Job.)

Lent for me is a time of self-examination about expectations I hold- of myself and my fellow Christians, and my understanding of God as I know God- Spirit, Christ, and Creator. What do I suppose I deserve? What do I anticipate that others deserve? Belief doesn't equate an easy life, nor does a lack of belief translate to hardship. Our understandings were never meant to center in this earthly plain, therefore we folly when we attribute our minute notions of favor, fairness, and retribution to an omniscient and omnipresent God. What matters is our relationship to God and how we reflect that message of love and acceptance to those around us, rather than sitting as judge and jury over another.

*Prayer: Redeeming God, help me to focus my heart on you. I covenant not to waste my time judging what others deserve in the light of your salvation, instead I ask that you make me a mirror of redeeming hope. Amen.*

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