

“Beyond Apology”

Luke 15:11-32

Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: Loving God, who claims us and makes us your own, meet us here as we open the Scriptures today. Reveal to us the Word within the words, so that we may see Jesus—and follow in his way. Amen.

This morning, we will continue our sermon series on the parables of Jesus. As we've seen over the past two Sundays, Jesus' parables are best understood as *challenge* parables.¹ That is, they challenge our assumptions, our biases, our stereotypes about other people, about God, and even about ourselves. Too often, there are elements of surprise in them.² Today, we turn our attention to what is traditionally called the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*.

“A man had two sons,” Jesus begins the parable.

His listeners would have immediately recognized this opening as a **familiar storytelling pattern**—a literary convention. They would have thought of fathers who had two sons. Adam had two sons: Cain and Abel. So did Abraham: Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac had twin sons: Esau and Jacob. In every case, a bitter sibling rivalry ensued, and the **younger son ultimately supplanted the older**. Knowing the script, the crowd likely expected to root for the younger brother. They assumed he would be the hero.

Imagine their surprise when the **younger son turns out to be the bad one**. He demands his inheritance before his father has even died. But by demanding it early, he forces his father to divide the family assets prematurely, exposing the family patriarch to public shame and ridicule. With the cash in hand, he bolts to a distant country and squanders it all on reckless living. But then, a famine hits. Broke, starving, and completely alone, he ends up feeding pigs—the ultimate humiliation for a Jewish boy.

Look, the younger son is a rogue, a scoundrel. “Prodigal” is too nice a word for him: honestly, the boy is a spoiled brat.

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of the Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction About Jesus* (HarperCollins, 2012), 47.

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (HarperCollins, 2014), 4.

But the younger brother is not just reckless; **he is shrewd**. The text never actually says that he has become a changed person. Yes, it says "he came to his senses." But according to Kenneth Bailey, a scholar in Middle Eastern studies, the phrase doesn't mean "he repented;" it likely means **"he woke up to reality"** or "he got smart."³ His first concern is his own survival. He realizes his father's hired servants eat better than he does, so he prepares a speech: *"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired servants."*

It is a carefully rehearsed speech. It may be sincere. It may not be. **Jesus never tells us.**

In my own life, I have known the **weight of resentment** and the **grace of an unconditional welcome**. After high school, I felt God's call to authorized ministry. I wanted to attend Silliman University, a school affiliated with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines that had a solid seven-year path: four years of undergrad and three years in divinity school to get ordained.

But my conference minister had other ideas. Without giving me a choice, he assigned me to another college, 235 miles away from home, but it didn't have the rigorous academic standards I wanted. I learned later from my friends that he resented the liberal professors at Silliman. To make matters worse, the school he sent me to was located where there was an active armed insurgency involving Muslim separatist groups.

I didn't want to go. In fact, I deeply resented him for sending me there. But in our culture, you don't disobey an authority. So, I packed my bags and went—grudgingly. Once I arrived, I buried my anger and frustration the only way I knew how: studying hard and trying to make the best of it.

Oh, and did I mention that there was an ongoing armed rebellion there? The first semester had barely ended when bursts of gunfire woke us in the middle of the night. The rebels had attacked the town where my college was located. Government soldiers stopped them about five miles from campus, but fierce fighting continued for two weeks before the rebels finally

³ Bailey, Kenneth E. *Jacob & the Prodigal Son: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story*.

retreated. During that time, classes were suspended because our college became a shelter for civilians fleeing the violence.

Gunfire. Fighting. Classes canceled. Just as I was beginning to let go of my resentment. I decided I had had enough. Against the advice of my professors and friends, I boarded a bus and headed home, unsure if I would ever return. It was an eight-hour journey. I had little money and barely enough to eat.

When I got home, I knocked on the door. My mother wasn't expecting me. We had no telephone then, and email didn't exist. She opened the door, looked at me, and said, *"Son, you look tired and hungry. We just finished lunch, but I can fix you a plate. Come in."*

Earlier in the parable, we noted that the younger son planned to ask for forgiveness—and he did.

But here's the question: Is he truly repentant, or is he simply hungry? You have to wonder whether his speech is a genuine apology or a carefully rehearsed strategy to get back to the dinner table. "I'm sorry, Dad, for squandering your money. Please pass the ribs and the mashed potatoes!" You could easily see the smirk on his face.

So has he truly changed? Jesus leaves the son's motives ambiguous. And perhaps **that ambiguity is intentional.**

Look, we want this to be a story about earning our way back. Pastors love to preach it as about conversion. A repentant sinner being saved.

But before the son can even pitch his apology, something astonishing happens. The father sees him from a distance... and runs.

To us, a running father is a heartwarming image. To Jesus' audience, it was a public scandal. Respected patriarchs did not tuck up their robes and sprint through the streets. They didn't rush. They waited. Protocol dictated everything.

But this father abandons his dignity. He sprints to reach his son *first*—before the neighbors can shame him, before the elders can judge him, before the village can reject him. **His compassion literally outruns his sense of justice.**

The father cuts the boy's rehearsed speech short, ignoring his offer to work as a hired hand. On the spot, he puts on a robe, a ring, and sandals on his son. The message is instant: *"You are restored to your place in this family. Welcome home, son."*

Let me continue my personal story.

So I actually went back to that college and finished my freshman year. But I never returned for my sophomore year. Instead, I left home for good and moved to Manila to work.

Sometime later, my mother called with news: my youngest sister was getting married. She was only sixteen. Sixteen. I felt she was far too young to understand what she was getting into—especially since the guy was ten years older. To me, it felt like he had conned her. I was angry with my mother for not stopping it, but she claimed she knew nothing until the engagement. I was furious with my sister, too, for keeping it secret.

Even so, I decided to come home. It took two days by boat. When I arrived, my mother was waiting at the door. She looked at me and said, **"Son, you look hungry. Come in. I'll get you something to eat."** You know, Filipino parents don't say "I love you" to their children. They'd say, *"Gutom ka anak? Kumain ka na ba?"* Son or daughter, are you hungry? Have you eaten yet?

Like the father in the parable, my mother met me with mercy before we ever cleared the air. Which brings us back to the heart of the story.

Earlier, I asked whether the younger son's rehearsed confession was sincere. Jesus never tells us. And perhaps that's intentional.

Jesus is **challenging our assumptions and disrupting our biases**. We want forgiveness to depend on repentance. We want grace to be earned by sincerity. We want reconciliation to come only after enough remorse. Frankly, we want justice before mercy.

But that's not how the kingdom of God works. In God's kingdom, *compassion goes beyond calculation, grace is given freely rather than exchanged as a transaction, and forgiveness is offered before it is earned.*

Just when we think the story is resolved, **Jesus introduces the elder brother**. He returns from the fields, hears the music, and refuses to come inside. He snarls at his father:

“All these years I have worked for you and never disobeyed, yet you never threw a party for me. But when this son of yours comes home after blowing your money, you kill the fattened calf!”

Years of resentment have finally boiled over. And honestly? We get it. We understand his anger because we live in a **world of transactions**. We are taught that if you work, you get paid. If you achieve something, you get rewarded. And if you fail? You pay the price. Like the elder brother, we sometimes **turn faith into a transactional ledger**—secretly hoping that God keeps score the exact same way we do.

And right here, the real tension of the story hits us.

How does a parent show love to a child who has never truly felt it? What does a father do when faced with one manipulative son and another consumed by resentment? This parable shows that while indulgence can't buy love, withholding it will utterly crush it. So the father chooses a different path: he goes out to both. He loves both, **refusing to let his family fall apart**.

Now, take a second look at the story. **Nobody has repented**. Let me repeat that: Nobody said, *“I’m sorry.”* Sure, the younger son started his rehearsed speech: *“Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and before you...”* But was he truly sorry, or was he just hungry?

It doesn't matter. The father welcomes them anyway. The party begins before anyone has formally apologized or proven they've changed.

New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine offers this challenging advice for our own relationships. She says:

“Do whatever it takes to find the lost and then celebrate. Don’t wait until you receive an apology; you may never get one. Don’t wait until you muster the ability to forgive; you may never find it. Don’t stew in your sense of being

ignored... Instead, go have lunch. Go celebrate and invite others to join you."⁴

And here is the truth: what holds true for our families holds true for the church, and for the world. The parable teaches us that the Kingdom of God is a place where your worst decisions do not define you. It is a place where acceptance cannot be bought, and where your dignity is fully restored long before you have changed for the better.

The younger son is easy to spot—we all know failure and regret. But the older brother? He is harder to recognize. **We embody him** whenever we secretly resent someone else's blessing. He lives in us whenever we think they should suffer just a bit longer before they are forgiven.

But listen: the music is playing. The table is set. And someone is standing at the door, pleading. The only question left is whether *we will step inside—step into a world where grace cannot be earned, because it has already been given.*

Two years ago, my wife, Des, and I went back to the Philippines to visit my hometown. I haven't been back in 22 years. It was a heavy trip. My mother had passed away just a month earlier, and I had missed her funeral.

We finally landed early in the morning, absolutely starving and exhausted. More than twenty hours of flight from JFK and a stopover in Manila. My two sisters with their husbands were there waiting for us.

The sister who had married at sixteen walked right up to me. She looked at us and said, "*Kuya*"—meaning big brother—"you and Des look hungry. *Let's get in the car. We'll go to my house and have breakfast.*"

And right there, **I was reminded of my mother welcoming me home.**

We went to her house and had a massive breakfast. She cooked my favorite childhood dish: *tuna fish head in sour soup*. Now, I don't know if you've ever had tuna head soup, but let me tell you—the best part? The eyes. Slimy but yummy!

⁴ Levine, 75.

The father in our story invited the elder brother to come in and join the party. He said, “*Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we have to celebrate and be glad because your brother was lost and is found.*”

This parable ends **without a resolution**. We never find out if the older brother ever walks through that door. That’s *intentional*. Jesus leaves the story wide open because **he is shifting the question directly to us**: *Are we open to reconciliation? Are we waiting for an apology before we forgive? Will we step inside and join the party, or remain outside in the cold, arms folded in resentment?*

Family estrangement is a hidden epidemic that’s destroying not just individuals but whole families. According to the *Cornell Family Reconciliation Project* at Cornell University, about 27% of American adults—roughly 68 million people—are currently estranged from at least one close family member. This includes parents, children, siblings, grandparents, or grandchildren.⁵

“A father had two sons,” says Jesus. **And we can supply names and details from our own situations.** Levine says finding the lost may be a lot of work. But it’s worth the effort, for from those efforts there is a possibility for **wholeness and joy**.⁶ May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ <https://www.familyreconciliation.org/about>

⁶ Levine, 75.