

PRODIGIOUS LOVE

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Today in the Orthodox Church we read Christ's parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32): A father had two sons. The younger demanded his share of the family wealth – "give me what is coming to me!" – and the father divided his fortune, then and there, giving half to each son. The younger son then departed to a "far country" where he "wasted his possessions in riotous living." During an ensuing famine, he found himself working for a local farmer, feeding pigs, and so hungry he was contemplating eating pig food.

And then "he came to himself." He recalled that his father's hired servants were better provided for. He said to himself, "I will arise and go to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be your son. Make me one of your hired servants.'"

He started the trek home. And "while he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran" and embraced him, and kissed him. The son began his litany, "Father, I have sinned ... I am not worthy ... make me ... " But his father cut him off, and in love restored him to the family, putting the family signet ring on his finger, clothing him in family finery and throwing a celebration.

The elder brother, who had remained at home tending to his share of the family wealth, was bitter, and refused to enter in to the joy of his brother's return. The father remonstrated with him, "it was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found."

Jesus doesn't psychoanalyze the younger son, but he does give a few hints as to his mental and spiritual state. In the culture of the day, the son WAS the father, the image of the father, and was expected to live accordingly. Yet somehow this son found the image of the father to be oppressive and constraining.

He despised his father and his family to the point of demanding his inheritance before his father was even deceased. Given free will and the ability and means to act as he chose, he "wasted" his father's gifts in prodigality, "devouring" his father's life work with "harlots." He freely received everything from his father, no strings attached, and he despised it. Unconstrained, he mutilated the image of his father to the point that he was unrecognizable.

The father, in contrast, is loving and gracious. He does not oppress or constrain his younger son, or seek to control him. He gives him absolute freedom of action and means to act. He accepts his son's choice and allows him to proceed as he determines best.

And he yearns for his son. The image of the father who sees the son "while he was still a great way off" is that of a father watching at the door, wearing out his eyes looking down that dusty road for his beloved. And when he sees him, he runs to him, not even waiting for the son's arrival. Far from demanding an accounting of his son's actions, he smothers apologies with embraces, and overwhelms self-effacing speeches with restored sonship.

The elder son, quite the contrary, despises his younger brother. He refuses to have anything to do with him. There is no welcome. The eldest actually has the temerity to blame his father for the younger son's actions and finds fault with his father for his loving restoration of the younger son, thus ironically placing himself outside the family and despising his father exactly as his younger brother had done. And yet the father receives him as well, not reacting to the slight and slur, but urging his elder son to find a place of restorative love.

One son despised his father and left; the other remained, and found himself despising his father. But the first repented – changed his way of life, returned to the father's house and accepted his father's love. The second, the elder brother, in the end turned from his father's love and rejected it.

As Jesus told this parable, the Pharisees in the audience "derided him." The Pharisees trusted their own good works. There was no place in their mind for the love of a forgiving God or repentance of "publicans and sinners." People like that were justly judged and needed to be driven out, not welcomed home. And Jesus, who came to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance, revealed their hearts: "an abomination in the sight of God." (Lk. 16:15)

The Pharisees believed that universal faithful observance of the law, the Torah, would induce, even obligate, God to return to his people. It would bring about a restoration of the Kingdom of Israel. But Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is more like a family with a loving father than a nation with laws. Yes, there is a king and a kingdom, but the king is our father, and he loves us.

When the younger son returned, the elder son was "in the field." We don't know, but we can fairly surmise that they at least managed their father's agricultural endeavors, if not actually working the land. This brings to mind another duo who were charged with tending a garden, and who were mesmerized by the thought of the participatory knowledge of evil. They fell prey to the delusion that their father was a controlling and evil tyrant who wanted to keep them from what was best for them, a monster who didn't want them to be able to choose for themselves.

Just as the prodigal was free to flee the father's house and indulge in prodigality, the primal pair were free to turn from love toward evil. And just as the prodigal was free to return to father-love, so we scions of the first parents are sought out by our father who yearns to enfold us in his paternal embrace.

But let's not be like the older brother, trusting in our own standing. Everything we have received, we have received from our father, and the only right attitude is one of gratitude and acceptance. If our brother who has wandered from the fold returns, we accept him and embrace him. After all, the angels in heaven rejoice over sinners who return. Let's celebrate with them.

And if we find that we ourselves have wandered, let's turn our footsteps homeward. Lent is a season of repentance, in little ways and large, of coming home to the father's house, of learning to accept his embrace and not feel stifled by it, of learning to accept our brothers and sisters without judging them or their past.

When we return to the father's house, we live by his rules, because they are healthy and healing medicaments for our condition. We listen for his voice and heed it, because he is our father and he loves us: not a controlling tyrant, but a loving parent who seeks our good.

Because if he were a controlling tyrant, we would never have received our inheritance, we would never have been free to leave and expend it as we would, and we wouldn't be welcomed on our return home. But he is our loving father, who makes us free, respects our choices, and celebrates our return home. Let's turn our footsteps homeward.