

Luke 15:1 Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear [Jesus].² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

*³ Then Jesus told them this parable:¹¹ “There was a man who had two sons...”
(For a full reading of the text, also read Luke 15:11-32.)*

A TALE OF TWO SONS

I. Brother, The Younger

Dear Friends In Christ,

I am not who you think I am. You think I am Pastor Martin, but this morning I am somebody else. In fact, I am going to be two somebody elses. I will begin by being a young man, anywhere between 18 and 30 years old, and in case you are wondering what my name is, I can't tell you that either. Jesus didn't tell anyone how old the younger son of the parable was, and he didn't give me a name. Well, it doesn't matter.

So there I was. I had had it up to here with my older brother and my dad. Well, my dad had his good moments. But he was still a whole lot more pushy than I liked, and my older brother was insufferable. I had had enough of it. I wanted out. But it was a typical family farm operation: Land rich, money poor.

It just didn't look like there would ever be any way out, to strike out on my own, until I came up with this idea: If Dad would just sell my part of the livestock and assets, there would be plenty of cash for me to go out on my own. So I did something I'm not proud of now, but this is what I did: after months of sulking around, trying to avoid work, breaking the rules, I finally asked Dad, “Dad, why don't you just break up the farm and sell the part that will be my inheritance? Then you and older brother can make a go of it, and you won't have me dragging you down. And I can do what I want.”

Father didn't act like I thought he would. I thought he would be all angry and I would get another lecture, and my brother would yell at me and tell me what a blockhead I am, and it would just be an ugly scene for the whole next Sabbath. I couldn't believe it; my dad agreed, but he didn't make it easy. He said he would work it out. He would let me go. He didn't object. What made it hard was that he was sad.

Within the week he had sold a third of everything. (In case you didn't know, this is how we Jews divide up the family inheritance. Since we were two sons, we divide the property into three parts, and the older gets two and I get one. You know, from the time I could count, that always rankled me.) Anyway, Dad let it happen but he was so sad that for a moment I thought about not going through with it.

Well, just a few more days and I was out of there. No more insufferable older brother. No more Dad. Just me, what I wanted to do, and a actual bag full of money.

I didn't just go to town or the next town. I didn't want my dad or brother hunting me down and taking me home. I didn't want the people in town to think, “Oh, so you're the son of so-and-so” and then go to shaming me. I didn't want to hear them telling stories about my great dad or brother. I hate it when they do that. So I walked—must have walked a couple weeks. And when I stopped walking, the fun started.

Did I have fun! You know, I have heard some people, some believers mind you, talk about their old way of life, almost like they were bragging, like they wished they were still out there on the streets.

Me? I don't want to talk about it at all. I lived like the worst of them. And to tell you the truth, I enjoyed it most of the time. As long as there was money, I had friends, and we had fun. So you might think I would look back on it like some sort of golden age. But I just can't look at it that way. It was a waste! It was a waste of all my dad had done for me from the day I was born to the day I left. All he did – gone. And it was shameful. I acted like something less than human, and outside of my whiskey-bought friends, other people thought of me as less than human. Then the money ran out, and my friends ran out. That same year the crops failed. Even wealthy farmers barely had enough food to put on the table. For me, it was terrible. No food, no money. Finally some farmer hired me to feed his pigs. At that point I was just glad that I was far from home. Oh, my brother would have laughed. He would have had all kinds of words of wisdom for me. So I fed the pigs. And sitting there on the split-rail fence watching the pigs in the muck, I thought of home and I realized that even in the worst years never did I ever see one of my dad's workers looking such a sorry sight as I looked right there. Then somehow it hit me that my Dad was where I should be. Somehow, I count that moment of starving to death, sitting there watching the pigs, wishing I could be a pig in the mud, as about the best moment of life, because I suddenly understood.

My dad had never done anything that didn't have love at the bottom of it. The reason his workers had food even in lean years was his concern for them, their wives, their lives. The reason my brother and I were heirs of a great inheritance was that he lived his life for us, to benefit us! When he gave me directions and talked to me and taught me – I had always thought he was trying to keep me in my place, but sitting watching the pigs, it's like everything that hadn't made sense suddenly did – because I had never looked for love in my dad. I always looked for what I wanted. So, I headed home, fast as I could.

And all that Dad had taught me over the years came home. It wasn't just about Dad, it was about God. All those times he taught me from the Law and the Prophets, about the God who made us and loves us and promised One who would redeem us. All of it started to make sense because I was back on his lap listening to him talk about God. And I knew that I wanted to be back in my father's house – or even in the bunk house. I didn't care. I knew that my father cared more for his servants than any of my friends had ever cared about me.

I would go back, hat in hand, and beg that he let me in. I wouldn't claim nothing, because I deserved nothing. I would get home, and my dad would be sad or mad, and I couldn't blame him. He had done nothing but good for me, and I had done nothing but bad for him. I would just beg to be a servant, because I knew anyone on his property would be cared for. It didn't matter who you were.

I even prepared a speech. Here's how it started, ***“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”*** Every day on the long walk back, I rehearsed that speech. I just wanted him to give me ten seconds, so that at least he would know that I knew.

Well, when I was finally getting close to home, rounding the hillside, I was watching to see who I'd see first. Dad, brother, one of the workers? Actually, what I was afraid of was that I wouldn't see anybody, and I'd walk in the front door, and no one would notice, and then I'd get so ashamed I'd walk right back out.

But as soon as I saw the house I saw dad out front. I can't explain it. I mean, I'd been gone for years and he was looking straight at me like he knew. And he moved. First I thought he was going to go back in the house, but then I saw he was coming down the steps and down the road. And he was running – and here is something you people will never understand. In our culture, old men never, never run. They walk. They sometimes walk a long, long, long way with that old man strength they have. But they never run. It is shameful for a respectable man to run. But my dad, he ran. And I didn't smile because I had a speech to give to him, an apology. But he just kept running. And before I

could get the first word out he had thrown his arms around me and he was crying. And it made me cry a bit too. But I started my speech, *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you...”* but he wouldn't let me finish it.

My dad always had a way like that. He always knew when you were sorry – and he also knew when you weren't even it was an apology worth giving a judge – but he knew I was sorry. So he looked at me and the clothes I had been wearing since I had been feeding those pigs way back where and commented that I didn't look good, or smell all that good either. And as the workers finally caught up with him (I think they thought he was going to have a heart attack), he started giving them orders.

I couldn't believe the orders. *“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.”* He didn't want me looking like a swineherd, or even like a servant. He was telling them to make me look like his son. “Cover up his shame. Dress him like the owner of the house. He is my son!” And then, after they brought the robe, the ring, the sandals, he acted like I'd forgotten how to dress myself. He told our servants to put them on me!

And then he said, *“Bring the fattened calf. Let's have a feast and celebrate.”* He even had the cow ready. It's like he knew I was coming home that day. I think he did, somehow.

What an evening we had! For the first couple seconds I felt ashamed. Except that dad was so happy, and because he was happy all the servants of the house were happy and all of my shame melted away like snow in May and it was gone and there was joy. Not like anything I'd ever had in my life. I had known fun before. I had laughed before. But I had never known joy before. And it was enough to make me go to sleep that night and not care if I ever woke up because I had everything in life that I wanted and needed, and I was in my father's house.

II. Son, The Elder

Now I told you I was going to be two people, other than Pastor Martin, and now I am the second. It won't take you long to guess who I am...

It's been just what I expected, from beginning to end. My little brother always was a bother, never listening to the rules, always trying to get away with stuff, relying on me, big brother, to pull him through. I was a little surprised when he asked dad to cash out. I mean, I never thought that even he would be so heartless as to say to Dad, “Can't wait for you, old man, to kick the bucket. Why don't you cash out and give me what I have coming?” At first I was surprised. Then I was angry. Then I basically said, “Good riddance. If a third of the place gets sold off, but we don't have that good-for-nothing around here, we will all be better off.” But Dad was all sad. He should've been mad as bulls at fixing time. But *my* thought about little brother ended that day. Oh, I thought of him a few times the first week or two after he'd left. But once I saw he wasn't going to come back crying to Papa, I never thought of him again.

I kept on working for Dad. I did everything he said. I worked harder than any of the hired men. The place prospered under my care and work.

After hardly thinking of little brother for months, maybe it was years, my peace was shattered. Here is how it happened. One fine afternoon, as I was coming back from the fields, it just didn't look right, didn't sound right, didn't smell right. The servants were gathered around the house instead of their quarters. Music was starting. The wind was just right and I could smell the cooking meat ¼ mile away. (You know, in the ancient world, we almost never eat meat except at special occasions, nothing like you people nowadays.) Just then I saw a worker out there and asked him what was going on. He said little brother had come back. And it was just like I always expected. I thought, “Must have run out of money. All that money Dad slaved away for for years! And I had a share in some of that work. All that money gone.” I was furious for the shame he brought upon the family. How could he show his face around here after all that? So I asked the servant again, “So little bro came back. What's all

the commotion about? It smells like we're fixing to have a feast." And he says—with a big wide toothy smile, ***"You father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."*** He stopped smiling real quick when he saw how mad I was, and ran off to do whatever Dad had sent him out to do.

I could have stood out there a month of Sundays. I simply refuse to go to a party where my brother is guest of honor. I mean, how low can we go? Bad enough that he comes back. But he comes back having shamed himself, wasted all he had, lived in defiance of God, and disgraced Dad, and now a feast?!

Someone must have told Dad I was out there, because he comes out and asks me to come in. And he asks again and again. I guess that's what Dads do. But he acts like I was actually supposed to be happy for my brother, just cuz one day he walks in the door and says, "I'm home!" Well, Dad may be a push-over but I'm not. And I told him so, ***"Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"*** Finally got to say what I'd been thinking ever since that boy left home!

But here is one of the frustrating things about Dad: you never get any satisfaction. Instead of thinking about what I said, or at least getting mad with me, all he does is begs me to be patient and loving. He acts like I am the one who needs to be corrected.

And I wanted to tell Dad, "Here you are saying that everything is well and good, that love covers a multitude of sins, that God forgives everyone who turns to him in faith, and all that. Dad, don't you remember that story, that illustration the Pharisees tell us? It goes like this: 'There was a king whose friend's son was taken prisoner. The king redeemed the son with the understanding that the son should be the king's slave, so that at any time, if he should disobey the king, the king could say: You are my slave! One day, the king said to the young man: Put my sandals on! Take my clothes to the bathhouse! That son began to protest. And the king took out the bill of sale and said to him: You are my slave!'"

"And they explain it this way, 'So when God redeemed the descendants of Abraham, He did not redeem them so that they should be His sons, but His slaves,¹'" That's what the teachers of the law say, Dad!

And I could see Dad looking at me with tears in his eyes, looking straight at me, into my soul, saying, ***"You are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."*** It's like Dad was telling me that I, not little brother, was the lost son. I don't know. What do you think?

Conclusion: "Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around [Jesus] to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Then Jesus told them this parable: 'There was a man who had two sons.'" Amen.

¹ Johnston, Robert M., *They Also Taught in Parables: Rabbinic Parables from the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, §78