

Whenever you go to a concert for a big star, there are the greatest hits you know the artist has to sing. Whoever heard of going to a Barry Manilow concert where he doesn't sing "Weekend in New England," or a Chicago concert where they don't sing "Saturday in the park"? and if I ever get to go to an Alicia Keys concert she'd better sing "If I ain't got You." If Jesus' parables were greatest hits, we all know no one would leave that concert until this parable was told.

Why does it resonate every time we revisit it? This parable gives Jesus' answer to an important question. The question is implicit. Our reading today begins: "the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." At this point in the book of Luke, the religious leaders have been questioning Jesus for a while. They've challenged him: who can forgive sins but God alone? Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? Why don't your disciples fast and pray? Why do your disciples pluck grain on the sabbath? Why do you heal on the sabbath? Why would Jesus associate with a sinful woman? What a surprise! You don't practice ritual washing before eating! And, You just keep healing people on the Sabbath! At this point in the book of Luke, they're not even asking questions anymore. They're just grumbling. But the question is implied all the same.

Why does Jesus welcome outsiders? If they suppose Jesus to be some kind of messenger from God, a prophet with great healing powers...if God sent this Jesus who welcomes outsiders, what does that say about God? What is God really like?

The disapproving religious leaders have their idea of what God is like. God is the only one who forgives sins and God forgives sins under very specific strict circumstances. You cannot associate with unclean outsiders, you fast, you pray, you honor the sabbath in very specific strict ways, you stay away from sinners, you wash before dinner: God has rules. God will judge harshly those who do not follow the rules. Honor God. Be afraid of God. Be afraid of those whom God puts in charge. If you live outside of these rules, if you are a woman, or a sickly person, or a Samaritan, or a Gentile, or a Eunuch, or a tax collector, or a sinner, God's welcome does not extend to you. This is what they believe God is really like. And they act like it.

But Jesus has a different idea of what God is really like. To answer that implicit question, Jesus tells three parables depicting God as a shepherd searching for the lost sheep, God as a woman searching for the lost coin, and finally, God as a father running to and pleading with his younger and elder son.

All three of these depictions of God are surprising. Comparing God to a shepherd in this time and place, would be like comparing God to an untrustworthy criminal let out of jail on parole who cannot get a job anywhere except in the smelliest most unseemly job that no one else wants. Comparing God to a woman in that time and place, would be unthinkable. Women were merely the property of men, not trusted with money or power, to give testimony to learn at the feet of the Rabbi, or to do anything except be wives and mothers or else live in shame. Comparing God to a father, well at least this time he is a man, a rich and powerful patriarch, who has land and throw parties, and has well fed servants and two sons. But even so, this father defies all expectations.

This father lets his younger son talk to him like that. “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” His younger son asking for his inheritance before his father is even dead is equivalent to him saying: “Dad, I wish you were already in your grave.” Any proper patriarch would’ve put an end to that disrespect immediately. But this father divides his property between his sons. His younger son must’ve sold this land that was supposed to be treasured by the family for generations and generations to come. That way he had money to spend when he traveled to a distant country and squandered all he had. All this would’ve been devastating for the family, for their power, their prestige, their reputation in the community. The only way to save face would have been to disown him. If that younger son ever showed his face again in that village, he risked being stoned to death by angry villagers because of the level of disrespect and contempt he had showed the leader of their village.

But, when the younger son comes to his senses, the father sees him returning from a long way off. Commentators suggest that this means not only has the father not disowned his younger son: he had been keeping vigil. Awaiting the return of his little boy, patiently, every day, looking for child’s silhouette to appear on the horizon. And when his prayers are answered, he runs toward his son. He won’t hear the phrase the prodigal has been reciting to himself the whole journey home, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son –” He won’t allow his son to

even suggest that he be punished for his betrayal and disrespect by being treated like a servant where once he was a son. No! This father calls for the best robe, ring, and sandals: he wants a party with the best meat, the loudest music and most celebratory dancing. That's a lot! Yet, even now, the scandal of this extravagantly welcoming father is not over yet!

When the elder son hears the party, he is so angry he refuses to join the party. A proper patriarch would not stoop so low as to leave the party he was hosting and go outside to a lowly son who disagrees with his daddy, and plead with him. But that is exactly what this father does. He pleads with his elder son. In the gospel of Luke, the last time we read this word, plead, (in the Greek, *parakaleo*), it was when Jairus fell at Jesus' feet, pleading with him to come and heal his dying daughter. So imagine a powerful, influential, important, rich man on his knees before his child, begging his child to come in a join the father's party. Unthinkable! This father was willing to recognize the anger of his son and listen to his full complaint and even offer his child an explanation of his father's actions.

“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

This is what God is really like. Jesus believe this and he acts like it. Over every expectation one would have for a rich and powerful patriarch, every expectation one would have for a holy and powerful God, Jesus tells a story which overturns those expectations.

What is God really like? God is like a father who runs to us and pleads with us and humiliates himself so that we know how much God wants to be with us.

And yet we still fall into this trap: of the younger son and the elder son. For the younger son, God is like a vending machine: he lives life from God. For the elder son, God is like a task master: he lives life for God. But this parable tells us what God is really like: what God really cares about is that we, God's children, are with God. God runs to be with us. God pleads to be with us. The father says it first to his resentful child, “Son, you are always with me.” That's the most important thing.

Beloved there is nothing wrong with knowing that every good and perfect gift is from God. There's nothing wrong with asking God for what we need and want. But if that's all God is to us -- someone to get things from -- we're missing out on being with God.

And there is nothing wrong with accepting the invitation to do God's good work in the world. There's nothing wrong with answering the call to feed and clothe and welcome and heal and come alongside those in need, in the name of Jesus Christ. But if that's all God is to us: someone to do good work for, we're missing out on being with God.

Beloved, if we judge ourselves unworthy to be called children of God, or we judge our little siblings unworthy to be welcomed into the family of God, we are misunderstanding what God is really like and we are missing out on who God really is.

Jesus tells this greatest hit parable so that people would understand: the prodigal, wasteful, ridiculously unfair truth of the good news is that God's justice ends in mercy. God's story is one of grace.

God gave up everything so that we would understand this and stop holding on to this idea of God as someone to get things from or do things for. God is with us. That's who God really is. God wants a relationship with us. God will sacrifice the dignity of the patriarch in order to show the unconditional extravagant love of a father. A father who runs, a father who pleads, a father who wants, more than anything, for us to leave our self judgement and our others-judgement behind and join the generous extravagant party God is throwing for everyone to attend.

So, beloved, surrender your self-judgement. Surrender your judgement of others. Surrender your pride, your worldly expectations, your self-sufficiency, and your self-deprivation. Whether we identify more the younger son, taking from God and doing what we want, or with the oldest son, working for God and judging others for not working as hard, or a bit of both, we need to surrender both those stances, beloved, and come, "in God's presence daily live," with God, as God really is. Merciful God. Compassionate God. Loving God. Faithful God. Mother God – wings wide open calling for her chicks. Father God – running to welcome the prodigal home.