

A DAD WITH TWO VERY DIFFERENT SONS

A father had two sons. That is how Jesus begins his story. We know this story by heart. When you hear this parable do you identify with one of the characters? If so, which one? Or do you think that this is a story with a moral but that it is not too applicable to your own life? This is a very hard parable. Very demanding of its hearers.

Are you the son who wants his own independence and to be self-reliant and has always been number two in his family. Does he feel like he's stuck? Do you ever feel like you are stuck in your own family?

Are you the reliable other brother who keeps the rules but feels unappreciated and has developed a sullenness about him, and is feeling more and more resentment? He does not even realize that his life has become about seeing what is NOT. He is not in the loop. He is not appreciated. He is not given anything. No one cares about him. You see.

Are you the dad who loves his very different sons and tries to be there for each of them? The dad who has provided for them all their lives but just cannot get them to see things the right way?

At the time of Jesus, the firstborn son inherited most of the family wealth. The second son and others might get some portion but the oldest got the most. That was the culture in which Jesus lived. Every son would know this. Every daughter would know this too because they did not inherit anything: when they were married a dowry was paid to the groom's family. Today that would not be allowed to happen.

Other than the firstborn, any other sons would have to wait for the father to die to inherit anything at all. I myself am a second son. I left home at sixteen to enter into the seminary. My older brother inherited the family business and his son after him. So when the younger son approaches his father to ask for his share of the inheritance, in effect what he is saying is this: "Old man, why don't you hurry up and die, so I can get now what is going to be mine then?" You get the sense that in this son's mind all his father is good for is the money. Notice how thoughtless and cruel this must have been to the father? And this son is kind of clueless. He thinks first and foremost about himself—his wants and needs.

If you had fathered two sons and provided for them all the years of their youth and saved to have something to give them to start out in life and your son comes up to you and demands that you to give him his share now? What would be going on in the father? How disappointed? How much of a failure did the father think he was if he had raised a son who thought like this?

And what was going on in his brother when he got wind of what his sibling had done? How angry, outraged and vengeful might he be feeling—for his father and for himself and for the whole family? How much more resentful would this brother be against his own brother? Was he glad his brother was gone and he did not have to have anything to do with him anymore? Did he want to teach his brother a lesson? And no one told him his brother was home or the party.

Changing gears for a moment, I would like you to think of this word: Extravagant. It can mean "to be lacking in restraint." Or. It can also mean: "To exceed what is reasonable or appropriate." The second son seems to fit in here. He gets a big bag of coins from his father and goes off on his own to live extravagantly. Way over the top. Live in a way he cannot afford. He is extravagant in squandering. Until

it is all gone. Then that kind of extravagance ends. Then his need enters the picture because before he had a lot and now has nothing. His need begins to become extravagant.

This son does show remorse for the harm he did to the father or the disgrace he brought to the family, and seems aware of his own shame. He is still really thinking about himself though. His father still is generous—even with those who work for him. This son hopes to sneak back in as one of them. At least he will have something to eat and a place to sleep which he doesn't have now. In his own self-interest he is willing to make some changes in how he lives and how he thinks. Maybe dad will let me work as one of the employees.

But think of the father. He is extravagant too. His son just shows this in a very different and very destructive way. The father's extravagance is in the world of forgiveness and mercy. The father is extravagant in the way he loves his sons. Always going out to look for his boy to return. Always hoping his son would come to his senses and return. And when his son does return, the father who is always looking for him sees him right away. He is so overjoyed that he has his best robe put on him, a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet. The father, once again, gives more of his own stuff to his son. He does not berate him. He hugs him. He kisses him. He celebrates his return with a feast.

When the older brother comes in from the fields he bristles that there is a celebration going on—that he knew nothing about. And he is outraged that the occasion for the celebration is that his degenerate brother is back and dad will probably bail him out—again. The older brother is extravagant too, though. Extravagant in his capacity to criticize and to pass judgment on his brother. It is safe to say that he wants nothing to do with his brother being back home. The older brother has turned his back on his own. That violates the Deuteronomic Code that says specifically NOT to turn your back on your own.

My friends, this is a story about God the Father, told by his only begotten Son. There is boundless love in God, available to us. When? Whenever we turn to him, asking forgiveness. There is no sin God cannot forgive except the sin of not wanting to be forgiven. When and where are you extravagant? Especially if you are a father yourself. The role of Catholic husbands-fathers-patriarchs is to get those entrusted to our care to heaven. Nothing else matters. This is our most important duty, calling and responsibility. Jesus will not judge us on our college gpa, bank accounts or debating skills on twitter. Is it in the area of mercy? This is a story designed to help us to see ourselves more clearly. Sometimes we are the prodigal. Sometimes we are the resentful son. Sometimes we are the father trying to keep things together. But our God deals with each of us no matter our sins. God wants to restore us but he will do that only if we allow him to do so. Lent is such a time. How long has it been since you came home to the sacrament of Reconciliation? Give the Father the opportunity to help you, forgive you and keep his family together.

May He bless us today and give us his peace.