

**A Ministry of Reconciliation**  
(2 Cor 5:16-21; Luke 15: 1-3,11b-32)

3-30-25  
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**A Multi-Faceted Gem**

The Lost Son Story is like a multifaceted gem. Every time you look at it from a different angle, you see something new. And yet, like a well-cut diamond, it all fits together as a unified whole that is both simple and complicated; like life itself. In some ways it is a story that tells the whole story. And if you are someone who wants a good story to meditate on during Lent, then this is a good one for you.

For one thing, it contains a classic Christian example of the journey to salvation. It begins with a son who doesn't recognize what he has and who squanders it all. He comes to his senses and then returns to his always generous and loving father who is waiting to rush out and greet him.

It also tells the story of a dutiful older brother, who is angered by his Father's joyful response to the return of his younger brother. The story explores so many aspects of the human condition: freedom, responsibility, generosity and selfishness, foolishness and wisdom,

guilt, repentance, fairness, jealousy, loyalty, betrayal, joy, reconciliation and more.

There are really no “bad-guys” in the story. Everyone’s behavior is understandable and yet somehow over the top. And there is the need for forgiveness all around.

This is not a simple morality tale with one right interpretation and one right answer. This is a multi-faceted masterpiece that challenges us to look more closely at who we are and how we relate to each other.

For example, “Where did the younger son get the foolish attitude toward spending money that got him in trouble in the first place? Maybe he got it from an over-indulgent father. And if so, what does it tell us about how we respond to the generosity of our ultimate Father in heaven?

### **Different Titles**

One good way to explore the story, is to read it taking the side of one character, then switching to take the side of another, and then the third and seeing whether we can give the story different titles based on what we discover.

The traditional title for this story is “The Lost (or Prodigal) Son.” (Prodigal means wasteful and extravagant). That title must have been given to the story by someone who saw the younger son as the main focus.

But the first sentence in the story suggests a different focus. It begins with: “There was a man who had two sons.” That would suggest that the main focus of the story is the father or perhaps all three. And so it might be better to call it, the story of “The Overly-Lenient Father.” or maybe “The Burden of the Older Brother,” because in many ways the resentment of the older brother is the struggle I think most law abiding Christians would identify with most.

The story could also be titled “Is God Fair?” or “Truly Repentant or Self-Interested?” because you can even question whether this is actually a story about true repentance or whether everyone stays in character and nobody is really changed from start to finish.

What I am trying to say is that there are different ways to understand this story and that this is like the story of our own lives in

community. It is easy to fall into the trap of focusing on one character and then believing that the story has one title and one correct interpretation. But If we read the story from the perspective of each character, we realize that it is a multi-faceted story that can legitimately be given a number of different titles. And yet it remains indivisibly one story about the life of a family; like a diamond that dazzles us with new insight each time we turn it. Like life.

### **A Ministry of Reconciliation**

This morning's reading from Corinthians connects us with the Prodigal Son story in a practical way, by challenging us to be "Ambassadors for Christ" and "ministers of reconciliation". In other words, where people feel that their realities are separate; where they feel as though their own interpretation of life, based on their own experience, is the only interpretation they can see; where they have concluded that the story of life has only one title, it is our task to be present as people who recognize that all our stories are part of a greater story and of a unity that is available to us in Christ.

The Prodigal Son story could also be titled "The Reconciliation of a Family" because it is also a story about how relationships are broken and how people come to wander through the world alone

and in isolation and yearn for the restoration of those relationships. And it is a story about how those relationships are restored, not by the triumph of one over another, but through repentance and forgiveness.

Thinking about our communities and our world as being gem-like in the way that this story is gem-like is, I think, very helpful. Each person in the story has a different experience and reflects the truth of God's love and the struggle to be reconciled with that love in a different way. And God's love is the whole diamond, the actual unity in which we all have our being; so that all our stories are part of one great love story.

What we also find in this story is the assumption that salvation and wholeness for all three main characters in this story is not just a personal matter between themselves and God, it also about the reconciliation of a family, who's members must each break free from the emotional barriers that prevent them from living together in peace and harmony.

This is the way salvation is presented to us in the Gospels. Salvation is not only a solo affair between the invisible God and each of us

individually. Our salvation always involves the healing of broken relationships, and it is always achieved through the practice of forgiveness and repentance: through letting go of grievances and changing our minds when we see that we have been wrong. And this is one of the reasons why church is important.

### **How is this a Cross to bear?**

There are times, when we forget all our differences, everyone is sitting around enjoying conversation or working together seamlessly and there is no place we would rather be. It is as though the problems of the world have fallen away and we are among friends. There is something deeply healing about those times; deeply salvific. The church is our sanctuary. It is a place to taste salvation.

But there are also times when church is difficult. There are times when we are separated by our idiosyncracies, sometimes by false assumptions about each other. (It is interesting that the older brother in our story, assumed that the younger brother had wasted his inheritance on prostitutes, when it is nowhere stated that this is what he did). He assumed that this was true and it colored his view of his younger brother more negatively than was perhaps deserved.

When our relationships become broken like this, then church becomes our “crucible”. Our walk with Jesus to the cross become very real. Church becomes the place where we are challenged to find our way back to the unity God made us for by seeking to be Ministers of Reconciliation. It’s not an easy thing. Sometimes it means eating our pride and disciplining ourselves. But it is worth it, especially when we experience those moments of unity.

And as Ambassadors, we are then also called to places beyond the church walls, into a fractious world, to share this message that none of our personal stories is the only way to tell the story of life; that there are many amazing stories and that all of our stories can be reconciled in the one great story. The story of God’s love.