

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

This is one of the best known and beloved of all of Jesus' parables; but it is so well known, it has lost the punch it would have had on 1st century listeners. They would have assumed that the Prodigal Son would be tending the animals his father had like any other hired hand; so to them the father's forgiveness and generosity would be extremely counter-cultural. The Prodigal Son had all he was going to get, and the father had nothing to give him because the rest of what he had belonged to the faithful son as his inheritance. Being dazzled by the father's behavior would then happen a second time, as the elder son rightly spoke of his claim to the inheritance and how he had been mistreated. Again, absolutely these were words the father should have listened to. Saying to the elder son that he was always with him, but his younger son had been lost but now had been found would have amazed people another time; a legal transaction had taken place, and the elder brother had had no part in the decision. There would have been no lack of astonishment then.

But now--now we know how this plays out. The younger son is welcomed back and treated in ways incomprehensible to the original listeners. The elder son complains and the father talks about lost and found and how the elder son was always with him but now the younger son has been found and celebration is in order. We are those people--the elder and the younger sons. They both gain an inheritance. Now we know that inheritance is the Kingdom of God, which Jesus is ushering in. This is one of the passages that make people feel pretty good about themselves.

Now you may think that's a very fine passage and that there's nothing there that you need to dig any deeper into. But doesn't it sound a bit too pat to you now? Every step that Jesus is taking is leading him to a horrific death, one that even Jesus prays doesn't happen. So something else must be going on. And indeed something else is. Back in Luke 12:13 a mirror image of the Prodigal Son parable is being played out. A man asks Jesus to make his brother give him his share of his father's inheritance. Not only does Jesus refuse, he tells a parable about a man with an abundance of material things...so many that he has to build bigger barns to hold his wheat. The man is very happy, but he dies that night. So no, you don't always get the party. Your inheritance is not as assured as you read in the Prodigal Son. Luke has Jesus making sure that the answer about the inheritance is not always yes. Unlike most modern readers (including me) the Prodigal Son parable had become stale. But when you look at the whole story, sometimes the answer about the inheritance is 'no.' And speaking as a person who wants Universalism to be true (Universalism is total redemption of all that is), suddenly these parables become much sharper, not assured at all. And Jesus will have much more to say as he makes his way to Golgotha. No matter how familiar you are with all of this, there is more. And I assure you, Brothers and Sisters, you will always want more.