

Who Has Gone Astray? by Holly C. W. Aastuen  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 March 14, 2010

“Now there once was a man who had two sons and the younger son came to him and said, ‘Father, give me my share of the inheritance.’ So he divided his property between them.

“Not long after, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant land and squandered his wealth in wild living.”

Thus begins the story, the story often called the Prodigal Son, the story that Jesus tells in response to a comment from some Pharisees.

You may remember how the scene began. We read—“now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathered around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” It’s meant to be an insult—a supreme insult, perhaps, meant not only to be heard by those in the conversation but by Jesus as well and not only by Jesus, but by the so-called sinners themselves. It was an insult hurled at everyone within earshot—this man is the kind of man that good society shuns.

The story that Jesus then told has become so familiar to us, so common in our society’s lexicon that even those who don’t go to church know the story of the prodigal son. They know about this boy who wanted to prove he was his own man, who took his share of his father’s inheritance and lost it all.

What many of us don’t realize is what an insult this sort of request was. Think about it for a minute—who among us would walk up to our parents and ask for a half or even a third of all they own so that we can go off and do whatever we want to do with it? It’s insulting to make such a request of parents who are living.

And yet the father in this story allowed himself to be insulted, he let the tongues wag when they saw one son sell half his father’s property. And when, a few days later, the younger son leaves for the ‘big city’ with his pockets bulging with money and food, the father loves him still.

The story, as we know, goes on to say that the younger son didn’t go invest this money—the only money he would ever inherit. The younger son didn’t even set some of it aside, thinking of his future when he might want to launch into a new life for himself with some seed money from his father’s estate.

No, what he did was ‘squander his wealth in wild living,’ throwing it away on cheap thrills, on things that don’t last, that don’t help pay the bills or cover the rent. Whether his vice was gambling or prostitutes or some other sorts of extravagant experiences, we don’t know. All Jesus says was he spent it on loose living until all the money was gone.

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To make matters worse, in his poverty he has to (horror of horrors) associate with the Gentiles and (even worse horror) feed the pigs and imagine what luxury it would be to eat the slop mixed with mud, fed to the pigs.

We watched a show the other day called Undercover Boss, where the heads of real companies go undercover and see what it's like to do some of the more menial jobs in the business. The episode we watched had the chief operating officer of Waste Management Corporation do entry level jobs in his own corporation. He sorted recycling, he went on garbage runs, but the most interesting job to watch him do was to clean out port-a-potties. The man who showed him the ropes was one of the most cheerful guys you could ever meet. But when he described just what this head-of-the-corporation was going to do in order to clean out a portable toilet, the boss's mouth turned into a grimace of extreme distaste. You could tell that this wasn't something he would choose to do in a million years.

This younger son, engaged in the equivalent of mucking out waste from a portable latrine, working at a job that in that day made him dirty of body and of spirit, finally came to his senses and realized that his father, the same one who had recklessly, prodigally, lovingly given up half of his property to his son, this same father was still a kind and generous man.

The challenge in telling this story to the Pharisees and teachers of the law is to get them to see that mental picture, too. Jesus wants them to see that God, whom the father represents, wants a relationship not only with the sinners and outcasts, but with them, too. God wants to welcome us all into the kingdom of God.

But the problem is that the father in this story is way too generous with this younger son. The Pharisees were the older son in the story and they didn't find the message of the narrative one bit to their liking.

Many of us here, myself included, are 'older sons,' not by virtue of our gender or birth order, but by virtue of our place in the church. We, like the Pharisees, know who's in and who's out. We know how hard we've worked and how much we've given to the work of the church.

We know that God loves the sinners, but we also know that the Bible talks about repentance and forgiveness in that order. So if those sinners out there want to be forgiven, at least they have to go through the humbling process of asking for forgiveness. They have to repent and ask humbly for God to give them a second chance.

Unfortunately for us, this younger son doesn't even do that. He rehearses his 'repentance' line "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son," but this story doesn't say if he rehearses the

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line because of true repentance or if it was just a line to get a roof over his head and food in his stomach. And even worse, the way Jesus tells it, the father doesn't even want to hear the repentance words, the father doesn't care what the son has to say in humility. The son barely gets a few words out when the father interrupts and begins a parade of servants rushing about the house and getting all the best (namely—all the most prized possessions of the father, even his own personal dress up robe) and giving it all to this son.

One of the things that struck me about this story was that those who were crowded around Jesus, those who were pressing in towards him, maybe not even giving him enough personal space, were the ones who, according to the Pharisees, were the 'outsiders.' Those people crowding around Jesus, hanging on his every word, were the ones who were the 'less thans.' They were the smelly shepherds and farmers and tax collectors and sinners. They were the ones who had been drawn to Jesus because of his words, who had felt the love he expressed, the love of God for each and every one of them, even if according to the law of Moses, they had not gone through every cleanliness ritual and maybe have even forgotten to offer a sacrifice for every sin they had ever committed.

They were the ones who were closest to the kingdom of God, physically and spiritually, because they knew that they were simply sinners needing redemption. They knew that they were the ones who needed to be saved and cleansed and freed.

It was the Pharisees and teachers of the law who stood outside, literally and figuratively, shaking their heads and scoffing at the extravagantly foolish love and care that Jesus showed those outsiders. It was the law experts and the teachers of the law that saw the foolishness of Jesus' extravagance as if when he looked at "those people" he didn't see sinners at all, but redeemed children of God.

What foolishness, we say as we stand outside of this dirty cluster of people around Jesus and shake our heads. What un-seeing extravagance and attention this man gives them.

And then Jesus turns to us and says, "Won't you come in? Here is where the party is. Here is where you can see God and not only God but the experience of living and laughing and loving in the way of God, the realm of God, the Kingdom of God. Come on in and join the party."

And we older sons stand on the outside, indignant that Jesus would even suggest such a thing. We are the ones who done everything right all these years. Why do we have to join the party being thrown for sinners? Why hasn't God thrown a party just for us?

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And still Jesus persists—"I want you to come into the party, too, and celebrate that God reaches out and embraces the sinners, the outsiders, the lost. You have always been with me. 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.

"Are you going to come in?"

"But we're the ones who paid for this house," we reply.

"Yes," replies Jesus. "Are you going to come in?"