

Luke 15:11b-32 Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' " So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. 'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "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." '

MY DAUGHTER attended the Montessori preschool at St. Johns on Lake Street, for one year. She liked it and I must say, when I came to collect her from school the children in the classroom were going about their business quietly, orderly, cooperatively. But the school "philosophy." made me uneasy, The overarching theme behind all Maria Montessori's techniques, was what she called "normalization." That is, Montessori taught skills and attitudes needed to fit into a "civilized" society. She focused on mastery of practical skills, tracking of incremental growth, and an imperative on order.

Can you imagine ANYONE in the 21st century hearing the word "normalize" and thinking it is a GOOD thing! Even 25years ago it was troubling. Today, it seems almost as if the only way to fit in today is by standing out. Ask that body-pierced kid who looks like he fell out of a tackle box: Do you want to be normalized? The only acceptable conformity is nonconformity and "normal" seems like an unattractive trap!

But wait a minute. There still is one group of people who continue to quest after normalization.

- They blend right in.
- They don't rock the boat.
- They learn their lessons well.
- They pretty much behave themselves according to cultural criteria.
- They play it safe.

Who are these normalized people? **Christians!**

- We show up at church on Sunday.
- We work hard at respectable jobs.
- We have made an art form of polite nice.
- We sweep our streets, and wash our cars, and plant some flowers.
- We vote and volunteer.

We have done a great job at normalizing Christian behavior, at creating a normalized church and a stable and dependable facade. This is all fine and good. Except for one thing. God isn't normal. God refuses to be normalized. We worship an extreme God. A wild God. An unpredictable God. A God who dances in unexpected directions. And frankly, as familiar as it is, the parable we just heard is anything but normal. Jesus is advocating some pretty bizarre behaviors that ought to cause us to take notice.

Think for a moment of the cultural context. The story begins with a description of the younger son's demand that he receive his inheritance immediately. This would have been the equivalent of saying, Dad, I wish you were dead. And instead of refusing, the father complies. In granting the younger son a share of the property and allowing him to leave, the father is not only losing property but also his son, whom he regards as "dead" and "lost", since he never expects to see him again.

A yellow alert sounds: The son squanders his inheritance in Gentile country. Then the high danger red alert:: Hunger drives him to take a job tending pigs. This is not only unusual but horrifying, the height of degradation for a Jewish young man. Yet, also, note here, a telling abnormal, unexpected truth is that there is no tone of judgment on the part of the teller: The narrative is told as statement of fact. There is no judgment.

The profligate come to his senses. It is not the fact that he reached bottom that is unusual, it's the fact that it leads to awareness, and ultimately confession. The father's response is total compassion. And joy. He *runs* to meet him. No nobleman in the ancient world would run in public, but this one did. And no parent in the ancient world would respond to a son in that way, receiving him with no probing of his motives, no explanations or reproof or anger or punishment. But this father did.

Now, less surprising is the response of the elder son. He is angry. He refuses to receive his brother; he refuses his father's pleading – in fact, in so doing, he creates his own major offense against the family. He does not address his father with any word of honor. He relates to his father as a slave owner and talks to him as if he were a totally unjust person. The father simply doesn't treat the younger brother like the human filth he is. Instead dad throws a party.

The fattened calf was a young bull or steer kept for a celebration. Meat was not part of the daily diet. The whole animal would have to be eaten in a short time or the meat would spoil, so the father is expecting a large group. Perhaps the whole village will be invited. Instead of hiding his son, he is celebrating his son – like a prodigal. And his dad expects him to attend.

Of course this story is about forgiveness. The primary dynamic of the Kingdom of God is forgiveness. This story is about the breath-taking embrace of God who waits, who is always waiting, for us to return. God is always ready to both receive and offer forgiveness.

But what if, what if, the Father doesn't represent God at all, but us - each of us, who always and ever has two sons, at least two sons, two competing egos, within us? What if we are meant to be the ones to gather both sons and reconcile them? What if this already abnormal story isn't just about kingdom actions in this world? What if it is about the kingdom within as well? What if it is ourselves we are supposed to forgive and embrace?

When taken as inner archetypes, the two brothers represent two halves of a whole personality. A father had two sons. Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve, Esau and Jacob, Mary and Martha: A person has two sides, two halves of one whole personality. We all have roguish, rebellious, pleasure-seeking, spendthrift, ego-centered selves. And we all have a desire to conform and to please, a tendency toward self righteousness and of resentment. We can all be judgmental and unforgiving. We all fall into joyless routine.

When we drive the younger brother side of ourselves into the unconscious, he becomes our inner enemy and not only opposes our conscious attitudes but robs us of our joy of life, our compassion for others, and our spontaneity. When we drive the responsible side into the unconscious, a pleasure-seeking life will be continually opposed from within by repressed conscience. Like an addict, the enjoyment is always a deranged pleasure, and a little over the top.

As long as the two brothers are divided against each other, one defeats the other. But if the two brothers can be conjoined into one personality so that the inner opposition is ended, wholeness can emerge, and the negative qualities of each brother will give way to the positive.. The older brother side will lend mature responsibility and conscious to the younger brother and the younger brother side will add humor, joy, compassion, and spontaneity to the older brothers.

I know it is dangerous to reduce Jesus sayings to psychological or Jungian creeds. But ask yourself, what is it about Jesus Christ that compels us to listen to his stories, ponder his questions, study his teachings, line up to try our best to imitate the One who loves and who saves? I think it is his own wholeness, his own perfect embrace of the complexity of inner balance. Jesus exhibits patience and anger. He is kind and compassionate as well as harsh or critical. He says he brings peace but he also pits father against brother. In Jungian terms, he is both extroverted and introverted, both thinking and feeling, both sensate and intuitive. He embraces masculine and feminine, spiritual and physical, gentleness and ferocity.

Jesus is both compelling and inspiring because he himself has integrated strengths and graces into a whole person, the prototype of all human development, a truly individual person and therefore someone unique. Someone we ascribe to be as well as to follow. Jesus speaks to any of us who seek our own wholeness and meaning.

This is the Jesus that allows us to trust him. The wholeness, the balanced strengths Jesus inner self, are apparent in his capacity to conceive of and carry out his extremely demanding life task. And in the end, this wholeness allowed his ultimate renunciation of himself. His was never egotism, but an ego strength that was constantly and joyfully subordinated to the Higher Will that he allowed to rule his life.

The kingdom of God begins from within. Each of us has a Pharisaic elder brother side and a wayward rebellious profligate side. Only when we recognize the latter can we hope to come to ourselves as the prodigal did. And only by facing our shadow sides, can we achieve the kind of higher moral consciousness the kingdom requires. How many of you are controlling and critical? How many of you dismiss what seems irrelevant or uncomfortable or even appalling? How often do you turn the other cheek not in forgiveness but in disdain?

Lent lends itself to such self confrontation. This God thing is a process, a journey, a work of life. Those who seek a way of living that does justice, loves kindness and walks humbly with the Holy, must always begin by looking within for truth, for balance wholeness. For the willingness and the ability to both accept and offer forgiveness. Jesus said, in Luke 9, "Once the hand is laid on the plough, no one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (9:62) Those who strive for the kingdom must be resolutely committed to the inner way. If we look back yearningly for the less conscious life we enjoyed before we immersed ourselves in discipleship, they we are not worthy, not ready. We are called to an ongoing creative process called growth. Life, introspection and extroversion, surrender to the love and wisdom and guidance of our Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

"This your brother was dead and he is alive; he was lost and is found." The gesture at the end of this is a gesture of peace.

Forgiveness of self is an essential component of breaking the vicious cycle of vengeance and retribution, of shame and guilt, of denial and resentment, of fear and pride. The call today is to look within. Have a private dance with all parts of your personality. Examine your fears and your loyalties and your priorities. Check for younger brothers and elder brothers. And then emulate the Parent who loves them both equally, and struggles to bring out the best rather than the worst of each side.

God made you. God loves you. And God wants you whole. May it be so.