

## **“Joining the Big Celebration”**

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Based on Brian D. McLaren *We Make the Road by Walking*, Chapter 52

Sunday, August 15, 2021

Texts: Romans 8: 31-39 and Luke 15: 11-32

The parable of the Prodigal Son may be one of the most well-read stories of all our scripture, and yet it is often misunderstood. We tend to focus on the Prodigal...and there is much there to make us think about...but he is not the main character. The father is. All three men have important roles in this story that easily serves as metaphor for us in relation to God. Make no mistake – this is about the father. The father of extravagant welcome who throws parties for ne’er do wells AND faithful servants. Brian McLaren in his book *We Make the Road by Walking* reminds us that this story fits into the vision of entire Bible, “From Genesis to Revelation we find the story of an infant universe into which is born and infant humanity that grows, comes of age, makes mistakes, learns lessons, and finally reaches maturity. Like most coming-of-age stories, this one ends with a wedding, as humanity welcomes God into its heart.”

But before we get there, let’s talk about the boys. Maybe you’ll see yourself in one or both boys. I’m not sure there are many of us who are either the

runaway or the faithful older brother. We're a little of both and all of us, from time to time, forget our true identity.

The younger brother you probably know well. According to the story, this young man wants his inheritance early. He asks his father for his half of the inheritance. Father graciously agrees. Son takes the money and squanders it quickly and rather, shall we say, unfaithfully. Eventually, he is envious of the food that the pigs get to eat. Let's stop a second. That means that a good, faithful Jewish person is working with pigs. It's gotten that bad. Pigs were unclean, and that also may have meant that he was working for a non-Jewish boss. Jesus doesn't mess around when he tells stories. We're supposed to get it how low this young man has become. And we, in our meritocracy, find ourselves less than sympathetic of this young man. He squandered a fortune. Some might go as far as to say he deserved it. And he did. But be careful when making such judgments of others. Many of us have made similar choices, but just got lucky that things worked out better for us than for him. That doesn't mean that he made good choices, but it does mean that sometimes it's far too easy to make rash judgments about other people. Anyway, after hitting this low, the son (still a bit arrogant in how he got there) realizes that there is much for him at home, even if

he were a servant of his father. So, he makes his way home. We'll finish the story in a bit.

Meanwhile, for many, the hero of the story, is the dutiful and faithful older brother who is running the father's affairs increasingly as the father ages (we can suspect). He seems upright, honest, hardworking, everything we would hope for in a fine, upstanding young man. We can even exaggerate on his goodness and surmise that he increased his father's wealth, was well respected in the community and wow, what a guy! That is, until the younger brother comes home. McLaren relates, "...human history can be seen as the story of a family, a father and two sons. The family experiences conflict. The rebellious younger son runs away and for a while forgets his true identity. The dutiful older son stays home but also forgets his true identity. The younger son reaches a crisis and comes home. He is welcomed by the father, which then creates a crisis for the older son." For the older son, the question becomes "will [he] remain outside, nursing his petty resentments? Or will he come inside and join the Big Celebration and rediscover his true identity in the family?" Self-righteousness can get in the way of a whole lot of celebration. Further, the older brother has assumed that this rebellious younger brother is going to get even more of what is rightfully his. I find it ironic, but neither son gets it that the inheritance they are receiving was

nothing they earned in the first place. It was the fathers to give, and he gave it in the way he chose. I believe it's true that we often do the same thing. What we have is a gift from God, given according to God's will. How we use it, and how we believe we got it is an interesting question. What really is ours? What just passes through our hands? Are we self-righteous about our inheritance that we did nothing to receive?

"Of course, this story isn't only about the identity crises of the sons. It also reveals the true identity of the father, whose heart goes out to both brothers, who graciously loves them even when they don't know it, and even when they don't love each other (McLaren, 260)." McLaren later in the chapter states, "This short parable is one of the best mirrors of humanity ever composed. In it, both the rebellious and the religious can see themselves. But more important, it is one of the best windows into God ever composed, because it shows a gracious and spacious heart that welcomes all to the table." Let's just sit with that for a little bit. Where do we see ourselves in the story? What does this tell us about God?

I know my answer to those questions, and yet I struggle with it every day. As a child of God, and especially as one called to a special role in God's family, I feel called to be like God as much as humanly possible. What is the loving thing to



do with a rebellious young child? How do we who have been faithful (as much as we can) not feel righteous indignation when those so-and-sos get what we feel they don't deserve? We rejoice in a God who practices true unconditional love. Or do we? McLaren says it well, "[the mystery of God's love] humbles us even as it dignifies us. This mystery impresses us with our smallness even as it inspires us with our ultimate value. This mystery dislodges us from lesser attachments, so we sail on in hope. ***This mystery dares us to believe that the big love of God is big enough to swallow all death and overflow with aliveness for us all*** (emphasis mine)." While I believe it, sometimes it's hard to live that way. Could God really be big enough, and gracious enough, and loving enough, to have enough for us all? If that's true, then maybe I need to keep challenging myself to how I think about my things, and/or about who belongs.

This is a journey. McLaren closes this chapter, "Do not fear," the Spirit whispers, "All shall be well." He continues, "That is why we walk this road, from the known into the unknown, deeper into mystery, deeper into light, deeper into love, deeper into joy."

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.

