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The parable of the Prodigal son is probably one of the best known parables attributed to Jesus. It is used to tell of the unparalleled love that God has for us and to give us an example of God's forgiveness and the promise of reconciliation. But the question needs to be asked: is that the message that Jesus really intended with this parable. This is one in a series of parables that Jesus tells, one after the other, in response to the Pharisees and the scribes taking Jesus to task because of his kindness to, and association with, tax collectors and other sinners. The parables preceding the prodigal son are the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin.

In both of these parables something is lost and then found and there is great rejoicing on finding the coin and the sheep – so much rejoicing that parties are given. Sounds like the perfect end to perfect stories doesn't it?

It is interesting to note that all commentators don't see it that way. Amy-Jill Levine, New Testament scholar, and a practicing Jew, brings interesting and often thought-provoking analysis of the New Testament. In her book, "Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi", she makes the case that we modern day Christians hear the story very differently than it would have been heard by those to whom Jesus was telling it.

If we stop with the easy, and possibly obvious lessons, good though they may be; we lose the way Jesus's first followers would have heard the parables. We lose the genius of Jesus's teaching. Parables and the tellers of parables were there to prompt the hearers to see the world in a different way; to challenge, and at times to indict. We might be better off thinking less about what they "mean" and more about what they can "do": They can remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb. . .

Amy –Jill says that when it comes to parables and to ancient texts in general, our listening skills are not as developed as they should be. We frequently miss the original intention.

Amy Jill believes that we frequently default to somewhat simplistic interpretations; and we can also often misinterpret historical readings that deform the good news of the gospel into something Jesus would neither recognize nor condone.

Her analysis of the parable of the prodigal son reveals that from a Jewish perspective, this parable can, and has been used in an anti-Semitic way. Many claim the parables, especially the prodigal son, reveal an extravagant, earth-shattering image of a God, the Father who forgives, and does forgive in a way that makes it seem that Jewish folks had no knowledge of a divinity who seeks relationship and reconciliation.

In this parable, the older son is frequently thought to be an allegorical representation of Jewish folk, who slavishly serve God, the Father, in order to earn a reward, or to soothe an angry Old Testament God, while Jesus proclaims salvation by grace. And common is the interpretation that the prodigal, given his connection to pig farming, represents gentile Christians, whereas the older brother, seen as a stereotypical Jew, resents the Father's outreach beyond the so-called chosen people, with their elitist, nationalistic attitudes. In these readings and more, the younger son is the repentant Christian, the older son is the Pharisee or the Jewish people as a whole, and the father is God.

Amy Jill believes that such interpretations not only yank the parable out of its historical context; they lessen the message of Jesus and bear false witness against Jews and Judaism.

Amy-Jill goes on to say that In its original context, the parable of the Prodigal Son would not have been heard as a story of repentance or forgiveness. Rather, the parable's messages of finding the lost, of reclaiming children, of reassessing the meaning of family offer not only good news, but better news.

Actually the term "prodigal son" does not appear in the parable until about the 4th century.

Many have come to believe that the term "prodigal" is a positive thing, such as "adventurous" or "daring" or "ambitious," when actually it indicates wasteful spending, or financial recklessness. There is nothing complimentary about being prodigal, that is, in wasting resources for personal gratification. Some say the parable is better called "The man who had two sons, because it is really about family relationships and reconciliation - and some ask the bigger question; which son is really lost?

The first son goes against conventions of the times by requesting his inheritance. In some circles this was equated with wishing your father dead, because the inheritance was to come at death.

Confounding the situation is the fact that the oldest son was to receive 2/3rd of the inheritance, yet the father gave the younger 1/2. He then squanders his inheritance and "coming to himself" decides to return to his father, supposedly as a slave, however from a Jewish reading, there is not much evidence of a changed attitude. As he rehearses what he is going to say to his father, notice that he does not plan to address his father as sir or master as a true slave would, but as father, therefore keeping the father son relationship with no real evidence of true repentance. He really has come home to daddy.

The older son then appears to disrespect his father by taking him to task about welcoming the younger son home, while he had been the "Good son",

doing all the work and apparently getting no recognition for his efforts, especially knowing that he was left with 1/2 rather than his expected 2/3rd inheritance. This might have had something to do with the older son's attitude. It would appear that the father was as complicit as the sons in this family drama. Rather than correcting his younger son, he handed over half of his estate, what in the Greek is described as his life, his bios.

The father, in his joy at his sons return, is seen as embarrassing himself through his generous actions – some say that he should have disavowed himself of his younger son, declared him dead, sat Shiva for him. They say he should have punished his older son for his disrespect to his father.

Levine considers these positions another strike against Judaism and says that from another perspective, the father acts as a true father and cites Pesikta Rabbati (184– 85) who recounted: A king had a son who had gone astray from his father on a journey of a hundred days. His friends said to him, “Return to your father.” He said, “I cannot.” Then his father sent word, “Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to you.”

So God says, “Return to me, and I will return to you.” For the rabbis, the challenge is not in seeing God’s love in a new way; the challenge— an inevitable challenge in every religious system— is to get the wayward to return.

And the father does just that with both of his sons. He realizes that the younger son was not the only one missing! The “good son” had been there all along, yet not seen. Think about this from the older son’s perspective – here he was, working in the fields and when the party started – no one invited him in!

No one called him in from the field, no one invited him to stop working and join in! No one even noticed he was missing! It’s as if he was the lost one- the invisible one.

Here the father is acting to save his family, to seek reconciliation no matter what. And notice that the New Testament recounting of this story uses the language of resurrection—the son “ was dead and came back to life” — which speaks to the father’s true joy: he has his son back.

He is seeking relationship and reconciliation.

While forgiveness is certainly a part of relationship and reconciliation, if we look at this parable with new eyes and let it speak to us on many different levels, we may see that not only is God calling us into relationship and reconciliation with God, but also with one another. This parable pokes and prods us to reach out to those who have offended, even dishonored us and work toward renewed relationship with all. It may cost us, cost us dearly, but the rewards are huge. I think this is so important, given the level of contempt and dishonoring that we witness, that we experience, in our society today.

The dead can be brought back to life – there is resurrection to be had, relationships to heal and celebrate, just as the prodigal father did. The other challenge is deciding if we can accept that is grace offered to those who we see as offending in some way: or will we be the older brother – refusing to heal and celebrate.

Levine tells us that if we hold back a bit, at least for the moment; not rushing to read only the acts of repenting and forgiving into the parable, then it does something more profound than just repeat well-known messages. It provokes us with simple exhortations.

This calls for some self-examination: perhaps we must recognize that we may have lost someone and not realized it – that the lost one may be right in our own household. This parable tells us that God is all about relationship, community, and reconciliation and that we are called to do whatever it takes to find the lost and then celebrate! Celebrate with others, so that we can share the joy and so that we can help prevent the recovered from ever being lost again. Amy Jill gives some really important suggestions:

“Don’t wait until you receive an apology; you may never get one.

Don’t wait until you can muster the ability to forgive; you may never find it.

Don’t stew in your sense of being ignored, for there is nothing that can be done to retrieve the past.

Instead, go have lunch. Go celebrate and invite others to join you. If the repenting and the forgiving come later, so much the better. And if not, you still will have done what is necessary. You will have begun a process that might lead to reconciliation. You will have opened a second chance for the wholeness that our God, through Jesus, is calling us to. Our God who loves us –as we see in the prodigal father - no exceptions! It is up to us to decide if we are going to join the party! Amen!