

# The Prodigal Son?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 30 March 2025

A Reflection by Elizabeth Lee

Lent 4C; Transgender Day of Visibility

Psalm 32; Contemporary Reading: *Blessing the Questions*  
from Jan Richardson; Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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In our contemporary reading this morning: "*Blessing the Questions*," Jan Richardson invites us to let the questions come. Rainer Maria Rilke, likewise addresses not only a young poet, but also to us:

*"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, ... Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."*

So let us pause for a moment and consider, having heard this parable maybe for the 50<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> or first time, what questions are resting on your heart. What questions are uppermost in your mind? What questions are stirring within your soul?

Pause.

I invite you to turn to someone near you and for just minute share with them a question that has been provoked in you by today's Gospel. Those on line might like to post their questions in the chat.

Pause for 1 minute

Invite two or three people to offer a question that has arisen for them.

Take a minute.

A challenge of reading from the lectionary each Sunday is that we encounter the text out of its literary, cultural and historical context, with little opportunity to adequately provide this background information.

This story, however, poses a plethora of questions for me, most of which I will not pursue this morning. Let me offer just six. In doing so I particularly wish to acknowledge the work of Rabbi Amy-Jill Levine, renowned Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies, whose *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* has provoked my reflection on this parable.<sup>i</sup>

So, to my first question: Why is this parable generally referred to as the Prodigal son? The dictionary defines prodigal in two ways. Firstly, spending money or using a resource freely and recklessly, to be wasteful and extravagant.

An alternative meaning refers to having something on a lavish scale. Being reckless with a resource - well, we have heard the younger son had spent everything before the famine struck, so he was somewhat reckless with his inheritances. But his father was complicit - acquiescing to his son's request, freely giving him a portion of the estate.

Furthermore, the father's welcome for his returning son, including feasting on a fatted calf was indeed lavish. So maybe we have a Prodigal Father and a Prodigal Son. In which case the story would finish as the celebration begins. But it doesn't. There is more to the story - the part involving the older son.

If we look at how the parable is situated in the Gospel of Luke, the prodigal title does not make sense either. Today's parable is part of a trilogy of stories. The lost sheep and the lost coin precede it. All three are stories of losing, finding and joyous celebrating. It makes no sense to refer to the other two parables as the prodigal sheep, the prodigal coin. So why the prodigal son? But don't let us get too hung up about parable names - they were never part of the original texts and they vary across bible translations.

My second question is why did the younger son leave home? A pertinent question I suspect as we mark Trans Day of Visibility. The story gives us no indication, but we can imagine there could be multiple reasons why a child may want to leave home and travel to a distant land. To disconnect from family and culture. Not feeling one belongs. Needing to explore one's identity. Seeking adventure, following love.

My own son, following his bashing on King St Newtown as he walked hand in hand with the man he later married, with tears running down his face yelled "*This is why we don't bloody well live in this country.*" We don't know why the son in Luke's parable left home, but we do know that it all turned pear shaped when the famine struck and he was so hungry he could fill himself on the pods the pigs were eating but no one gave him anything, so he thought he would better off back home, even if that was as a servant.

Question three - what was it like to be so welcomed by his father? The father appears to have been keeping watch for him. Regardless of why he left, this returning son is tenderly embraced by his father, dressed in the finest robe and adorned with a ring and shoes, then topped off with a celebratory feast. No questions asked. A very warm welcome home indeed, by dad at least.

That brings me to my fourth question. Why was the older son not aware of and not invited to the party?

He was working out in the field and only knew of the party on hearing the music and asking one of the workers what was going on. Many had been invited to the feast, but this son knows nothing of it. No wonder he was angry! His brother had been away for some considerable time, returned home. Sufficient time had elapsed and for the calf to be butchered, guests invited, and the celebration to get under way.

It appears to me that the father has treated this older son badly. We don't know if the older son has been shunned, or if it was a massive oversight that he was not invited. Add to that, no doubt the older son has been lumbered with a whole lot of extra work while his younger sibling travelled to distant lands. Who wouldn't be angry! An injustice has been done. Relationships need to be made right. I suspect both the brother, and the father need to make amends for the damage they have inflicted on their relationships with their son and brother.

Turning to my fifth question, why has this parable been traditionally interpreted as being about forgiveness and used as an exemplar of divine forgiveness, a forgiveness we should emulate? It is hardly a good model for forgiveness, unless one equates forgiveness with what Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes as cheap grace, and Lionel alluded to a couple of weeks ago. Unfortunately far too often the Christian tradition promotes the cheap grace of forgiveness.

In part, the writer of the gospel, prepares the listener to hear it as a parable of forgiveness. Remember it is part of a trilogy. Following the finding of the lost sheep Jesus is quoted as saying “*there will be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent.*” In a similar fashion, when the woman finds the lost coin Jesus adds “*there will be the same kind of joy before the angels of God over one repentant sinner.*”<sup>ii</sup> By the way, I am not quite sure how a sheep or a coin repents.

Were these the words of Jesus or were they added later by the writer of the Gospel? Returning to this morning’s parable, it concludes differently, to the preceding ones with the words “*But we need to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found.*” The emphasis of all three is to rejoice and celebrate what has been lost.

However, the emphasis on forgiveness that the writer of the Gospel alludes to has been further enhanced by theologians and preachers across the centuries, such that the prodigal son and his father, in contrast to the older son, have entered into Christian and secular consciousness as exemplars of forgiveness and reconciliation.

This is an unfortunate consequence as it sets the dangerous precedent of unconditional forgiveness and fails to give attention to the necessary work of repentance and repair which both the Jewish tradition and early Christianity required when it comes to interpersonal forgiveness.

In the Jewish tradition, to be forgiven one needs to do the work of repentance and repair.<sup>iii</sup> Only then can the one who has caused harm ask for forgiveness. There is no evidence of the father or the younger brother making amends with the older brother. Likewise, if the younger son had offended his father, the father has not required him to do the work of making amends. The parable offers no helpful modelling of forgiveness and reconciliation.

While speaking of forgiveness, there is little biblical evidence in either the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament for unconditional Divine forgiveness as is often assumed by many Christians. Nor that Jesus requires unconditional forgiveness in human relationships.<sup>iv</sup> It seems to me God and humanity long for right relationship rather than forgiveness *per se*.

Now to my sixth question: how is this story resolved?

We don’t know. And that is the gift of a parable. Parables don’t offer answers. Rather the purpose of these little stories is to provoke. To make the audience think, to wonder, ponder and discuss. To question. To challenge. To allow us to consider how it is speaking to us in our context today.

We are not just to accept this story as a story about a manipulative younger son who squanders the inheritance, he has extracted from his still living father. Then, coming to his senses he decides to return home where he thinks he will be better off, is only embraced by the arms of his forgiving father, who goes on to throw a big party. All the while his older brother refuses to join the celebration.

Maybe if we are going to give the parable a title, it could be the lost son. Or better still the two lost sons. For both in different ways were lost and disconnected from father and community.

So, my final question- well really two questions. How is this parable speaking to you today? What questions are you left with now?

As I conclude, I again invite us to pause and notice what questions are arising now and what invitation is being offered to you as you listen to this parable which intentionally provokes. Then maybe over morning tea or at a later time you might wonder, ponder and discuss with another.

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<sup>i</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2014).

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 15: 7,10.

<sup>iii</sup> Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022).

Mark Dratch, "Forgiving the Unforgivable? Jewish Insights into Repentance and Forgiveness.," in *Forgiveness and Abuse: Jewish and Christian Reflections*, ed. Marie Fortune and Joretta Marshall (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 7–24.

Solomon Schimmel, "Interpersonal Forgiveness and Repentance in Judaism," in *Forgiveness in Context: Theology and Psychology in Creative Dialogue*, ed. Fraser N. Watts and Liz Gulliford (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 11–28.

<sup>iv</sup> Peter G. Horsfield, *Forgiveness & Reconciliation in Situations of Sexual Assault: Paper*, ed. Uniting Church in Australia: Occasional Paper ([Sydney]: Uniting Church in Australia, Commission on Women and Men, 1994).