

Parables are stories of many facets and lessons. They are mirrors in which we can recognize ourselves. For instance, in hearing the familiar story some of us know what it's like to long to embrace a child who has lost her way. Some of us know what it's like to make really bad decisions and wonder if our lives can be turned around. Some of us know what it's like to react to family drama with resentment, even if we know we shouldn't.

Jesus was talking to religious leaders who had been grumbling about him hanging out with the wrong kind of people. This parable is in response to their indignation, and I imagine Jesus was really hoping they would recognize themselves when the older brother steps in the story.

The focus of this parable is usually on the waywardness of the younger son, the forgiveness of the father. But it's also a parable about that maligned older brother. Let's take a closer look at him.

I follow an Australian website that I commend to you --- called Laughingbird.net (named for the kookaburra) We have used his seasonal affirmations of faith occasionally instead of the Nicene Creed. His seasonal eucharistic prayers are truly beautiful. In the sermons he posts sometimes I run across some slang unique to Australia. I can usually figure out what the slang means.

This one had me stumped. "spitting the dummy" Does anyone here know what that means? Neither did I. Thank God I'm a preacher in the era of google. It told me it evokes the image of a baby getting so upset it has to spit out its pacifier (known as a dummy in Australia) in order to cry and howl to get everybody's attention.

This preacher suggested that is what the older brother in today's parable was doing. Spitting his dummy. The angry brother lists reasons why he should be more beloved than his brother. And hearing those reasons, he seems very reasonable in his accounting, doesn't he?

But God is not in the accounting business; that's the whole point of this story. God is in the reconciling business. That idea that everybody gets something whether they deserve it or not rubs us the wrong way. Intellectually we might be able to accept the concept of grace --- undeserved favor. We are willing to accept God's grace for ourselves, but emotionally how can we accept that God is that gracious to everyone. Whether they deserve it or not. Because that is just not fair. Which is true. It really isn't. And we should thank God that he's not fair, he's gracious and merciful instead and you and I are the beneficiaries of his grace. Grace is not grace if we deserve it. God's grace is an embrace wide enough to welcome everyone home, no matter what they deserve to find when they return.

Besides googling “spit the dummy” I googled the word prodigal. its simply not a word I use in my everyday conversation and wanted to make sure I got it right. “prodigal” doesn’t mean lost (which I thought it did), it actually means indulging in extravagant and reckless spending.

I think perhaps the older brother indulged in some reckless “spending” of his own. He wasted some of his time thinking he is valued more than his brother, then indulged himself in thinking that he is not valued, believing his brother shouldn’t be. He may not have ever gone far from home, but he was very far from understanding his father’s love for him.

Parables are fascinating ways to communicate values, truths, and characteristics about God and God’s kingdom. This story helped people understand what God’s forgiveness might feel like.

That experience of embracing a child you thought you might have lost ----- some people hearing that story would say, yes, I know what that feels like. I know how that kind of unconditional love feels. Jesus was telling them, that’s how much God loves you; like a father finding his lost son. The experience of being welcomed home, no matter what you have done, no matter how nervous you were about crawling back to one you’ve hurt, and being accepted with open arms ----- people across the ages hearing this story would say, Oh yeah I know what being forgiven feels like. Jesus was communicating the concept of love and forgiveness in a way that many different people could understand. God’s love is so much deeper than your sin could possibly be.

Like the great teacher he was, Jesus used different ways to convey the concepts he wanted to communicate. Through his actions, and through his parables, he passed along these concepts, with the intention of transforming us.

When we are transformed by God’s love and forgiveness, we are able to pass God’s love and forgiveness along to others through our actions and the stories we tell.

We are *walking parables*, people. We are made in the image of God. When people look at us, they should learn about us but also come to understand something about God. They should learn something about what God has done and is doing in us. So be a parable, in a good way. Be the lesson you want people to learn about God.

Yes, people, we *matter* to God! We are valued and God wants us for his own. God wants us reconciled to him. God’s love is so much deeper than your sin could possibly be.