

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible, light a candle beside it, and pray the gathering prayer below. Sing “Amazing Grace,” which echoes words from Sunday’s gospel.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now I’m found.

Was blind, but now I see.

LEADER: St. Augustine prayed, “O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

ALL: Be with us, forgiving God.

LEADER: Save us from righteous certainty that we deserve more than others and others deserve what they get.

ALL: Transform our judgments. Heal our relationships.

Through many dangers, toils, and fears, I have already come. 'Twas grace that brought me safe thus far and grace shall lead me home.

The New American Bible calls Sunday’s gospel the parable of the lost son. This title picks up on the theme in Luke 15, a chapter featuring three parables—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

The title gives no hint of a father or brother or the family dynamics. The parable is about the problem child.

The New Revised Standard Bible calls the same passage the parable of the prodigal and his brother. This title suggests sibling rivalry, one brother more the focus than the other. It gives no hint of the father.

Perhaps a better title is the parable of the forgiving father. Actually when Jesus begins telling the parable, he stresses the father, “A man had two sons.” Jesus strips the story down to three relationships—father to each of the sons, the sons to each other.

Is the parable about my younger sister who needed constant attention because she was born severely hard of hearing? Mother put her teaching skills to use in constant phonics lessons. If my sister held her ears or claimed I whistled to hurt her ears, I got a reprimand. Naturally my sister became very creative in using her ears against me.

Is the parable about the younger son who absorbs more attention than the oldest son? Or is the story about me, the dutiful oldest child, dependable and responsible, the one who ran errands the fastest and picked a full bushel of peas in the garden without help? Is the parable about the brother’s resentment for too little appreciation? Who is lost in this story?

Then there is a feminist question. Where is the mother? Is her absence the reason a favorite younger son grows apart and the other son fails to please his father no matter how hard he tries? The story gives us no clue, but these questions introduce familiar family dynamics.

● Who are you like in the story—the wild, lost son? The dutiful son? The challenged father? The absent mother?



GOSPEL

Jesus urges us to forgive and rejoice.

NARRATOR: Tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around Jesus to hear him, at which the Pharisees and the scribes murmured.

PHARISEES, SCRIBES: This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

NARRATOR: Jesus told them this parable:

JESUS: A man had two sons.

YOUNGER SON: Father, give me the share of your property that will fall to me.

JESUS: So the father divided up the property. After a few days the younger son, having gathered together all his things, went away to a far-off country, where he squandered his money in dissolute living. After he had spent his money, a great famine began throughout that country and he began to suffer dire need. One of the citizens sent him to feed his pigs. The son longed to fill his belly with the pods the pigs ate, but no one give him any. Finally he came to his senses.

YOUNGER SON: How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough bread, while I am perishing in famine? I will get up and return to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son. Make me one of your hired hands."

JESUS: Getting up, the young man set off for his father's house. While he was still far away, his father caught sight of him and was moved with compassion. He ran out to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him.

YOUNGER SON: Father, I have sinned against God and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.

FATHER: Servants, bring out the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Take the fatted calf and kill it. Let us eat and rejoice because this son of mine was dead and lives again. He was lost and is found.

JESUS: They began to celebrate. Now the elder son was out in the field. As he came in, he neared the house and heard music and dancing. He summoned one of the servants and inquired what was happening.

SERVANT: Your brother came, and your father killed the fatted calf because he has him back in good health.

JESUS: The son was angry and would not go in, so his father came out and begged him.

ELDER SON: For so many years I have served you and never neglected your commands, yet never have you given me so much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours comes back after devouring your property with loose women, you killed the fatted calf for him.

FATHER: Child, you are with me always, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice! This brother of yours was dead and lives again. He was lost and is found.

Luke 15.1-3,11-32



Jesus comes to welcome and celebrate sinners.

The younger son acts as if his father were dead by claiming his share of his father's property. He goes to a distant country, cutting his family ties. He squanders his money. He is lost, but unlike the sheep whose shepherd leaves the 99 to find the one or the lost coin that the homemaker sweeps to find, the father doesn't seek him out.

The young man is entirely wrong about which relationships are most sustaining in his life. He chooses a lifestyle that gathers party people around him. The consequences become clear to the young man when he finds himself a starving servant at a hog trough, forbidden to eat the sweet pods he feeds the pigs.

Pigs are unclean animals, according to the law of Moses. The younger son has sunk to depths unimaginably distant from the traditions and experience of law-keeping Jews.

Only when the younger son bottoms out at the pig trough does he change his mind and heart about what he wants. In the contemporary 12-step language of Alcoholics Anonymous, the younger son turns himself over to a higher power. His self-centered lifestyle has starved him into recognizing he needs a sustaining relationship.

The pig trough turns out to be a holy place. The younger son confesses he has sinned against God and his father. To sin is to miss the mark, to break relationships.

Jewish scripture scholar Amy Jill Levine suggests the younger son is spoiled. His father has given him what he wanted. At the pig trough the son rehearses a speech that will get him back in his father's favor.

Luke, however, holds up the younger son as a model of conversion, an example of the sinners Jesus comes to forgive and embrace. The repentant sinner is Luke's ideal Christian.

Nelson Mandela offers a similar model. He refused to be called a saint unless by a saint people meant "a sinner who keeps on trying."

● **Where have the pig troughs in your life been—the holy places where consequences have made the emptiness of a job or a relationship clear?**

● **Who do you regard as the ideal Christian? How like or unlike the prodigal son is your ideal?**

Although the father does not go to the far off country to seek his lost younger son, he does run to meet him as soon as he sees him coming. He embraces and kisses him. He is a merciful, forgiving father. He doesn't allow the son to finish the



confession he has planned, which ends in asking to be only a hired hand.

The son's act of coming home acknowledges his desire to reconnect as much as any words can say. The father restores him as a son with robe, ring, and sandals and sets a homecoming table for him.

● **What does the father in the parable tell us about God?**

Which son is lost? The older son is the one the father has to seek out and beg to come in to the party. The parable is unfinished. Inside the house the younger son's homecoming party is in full swing. Outside the father confronts his other son, who is stuck in anger that his brother gets more for repenting than he gets for obeying diligently.

The father isn't fair; he's merciful. Perhaps he recognizes the partying lifestyle

has been its own punishment. The younger son has lost everything. The father rejoices the son has found his way home and belongs again in the family.

But the younger son doesn't get the punishment the older son thinks he deserves for "devouring his

father's property." The father's mercy angers the older son. It reminds us we can't earn or deserve God's love. It's a gift that reveals who God is.

In this parable Jesus is addressing the scribes and Pharisees who criticize him for welcoming and eating with sinners. The parable invites them to the law-breaker's homecoming dinner. Will they come? Will the older son? Will we?

● **When have you been the repentant, prodigal son?**

● **When have you been the forgiving father?**

● **When have you been the resentful son?**

DO SOMETHING

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● **Explore ways to support human service efforts to shelter people who are homeless in your area and to provide food for families that need help making ends meet.**

Israel celebrates Passover.

This Sunday we hear the fourth of the Cycle C first readings, which recount great moments in Israel's history. These readings place Jesus' passage from death to life in continuity with the love God reveals to Israel in making a covenant with Abram, in calling Moses to lead the Hebrew slaves to freedom, in leading the people through the desert to settled life and nationhood.

Joshua leads Israel into the promised land after Moses' death. The people pass over the Jordan River into Israel in Joshua 4.8-24, ending the 40-year journey in the wilderness that began when they passed through the Red Sea.

God dries up the waters of the Jordan for the people to cross over just as God opened a dry path through the waters of the sea (Exodus 14-15). This imagery calls us to recognize that the God who separated the sea from the dry land at creation is at work making a path for Israel through history.

In the promised land God directs Joshua to remove the reproach of Egypt by having all the men among the people circumcised. Sunday's reading begins with these events just completed. The people who enter the promised land with Joshua have a common heritage—circumcision, the law given to them at Mount Sinai, and their

experience of God's care in the wilderness.

God's saving care which Israel celebrated on the first Passover in Egypt continues, giving the people new reason to celebrate at Gilgal. They eat cakes made from the grain of the land, a sign they are leaving the desert and returning to the home of their ancestors.

This brief passage from Joshua shows how rituals and feasts establish continuity and identity for a people. Passover as a feast gathers new moments of God's love into the celebration of past deeds.

Passover at Gilgal

The Holy One said to Joshua, "Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you."

While the Israelites were encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth of the month. On the day after the Passover they ate of the produce of the land in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain.

On that same day after the Passover on which they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased. No longer was there manna for the Israelites, who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

Joshua 5.9,10-12

- How does your family celebrate and preserve its identity? With what feasts, reunions?

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PRAY

Recall people with whom you have shared your home, meals, and life in the past. Reflect about who you need to welcome back. Name these people to yourself, and imagine how they can be reconciled with you. Make a resolution to have a homecoming with someone this week.

LEADER: We live in the irrepressible love that created the heavens and earth.

ALL: In Christ we are all new.

LEADER: We stand among the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, believers as countless as the stars.

ALL: In Christ we are all new.

LEADER: God's fiery presence to Moses in the burning bush burns in our limbs.

ALL: In Christ we are all new.

LEADER: The God who led Israel on a dry path through the sea and a smooth path through the wilderness opens a way where there is no way for us.

ALL: In Christ we are all new.

LEADER: In every Eucharist we share Jesus' Passover from death to new life and the promise of our own.

ALL: In Christ we are all new.

