

I really love this parable- for a lot of reasons.

But one of the reasons I love it the most is because it has so many layers. Every time I spend time reading, studying and pondering it, I discover new insights and find new angles and perspectives...and then I think, “Jesus was so incredibly clever; I bet that was just what he intended when he told this parable.”

I have no doubt that Jesus knew very well that this parable would be remembered, shared, and eventually written down so that it would be retold for centuries to come.

But there are some significant things in this parable that we are likely to misunderstand, simply because we live in a different time and culture; so let me share a few key things that we know, thanks to scholars and historians.

The world in which Jesus lived was largely agrarian, for one thing.

Chances are that nine out of ten of Jesus’ listeners were rural farmers, like the family in the parable. Their land was their livelihood. They received it in trust from their ancestors and they held it in trust for their children. There was no courthouse where they could record their claims to it. Those claims were kept in the memory of the community, where honor was everything. Break faith with the community or lose its respect and your property lines might be “forgotten,” just like that.

A great deal depended on being and having good neighbors. When you needed help getting your crops in before the rain came, or raising a barn—or having a baby, or digging a grave—you counted on the neighbors, the same way they counted on you. You traded a dozen of your chickens for one of their lambs. You invited them to your parties and they invited you to theirs.

If things worked out the way they were supposed to, then your children married their children, strengthening the kinship bonds between your clans and linking your farms in a patchwork family quilt.

In this world, an individual had little meaning apart from his or her family. Identity was conferred in the plural, not the singular.

It’s all about the family name, the family history, the family standing in the community. And even in the US in the 21st century we can understand that. But there are other things about Jesus’ Middle Eastern world that we have no reference for—such as the huge honor owed the patriarch of a clan, and the elaborate code for keeping that honor in place. Patriarchs did not run. Patriarchs did not leave their places at the heads of their tables when guests were present. Patriarchs did not plead with their children; they told their children what to do.

According to the rabbis “three cry out for justice and are not answered: he who has money and lends it without witnesses; he who acquires a master; he who transfers his property to his children in his lifetime.”

And so, told in this kind of culture, today the parable becomes the parable of a dysfunctional family—a story about a weak patriarch with an absentee wife and two rebellious sons he seems unable to control, who is willing to sacrifice his honor to keep his community together. It’s a reunion story, not a repentance story. It’s about the high cost of reconciliation, in which individual worth, identity and rightness all go down to the dust for the sake of relationship and the community.

When the younger son asks for his share of the family property, he deals his father a double blow. He not only means to break up the estate; he also means to leave his father, who counts on both of his sons to care for him in his old age.

And in asking for his share of the estate- due to him at the time of his father’s death- he is essentially declaring that his father is effectively dead as far as he is concerned.

If there is a mother upstairs listening from behind her bedroom door, then she gets clobbered too. When her husband dies, (and there is a good chance he will die first) everything she has goes straight to her sons. And dependent as she is upon them both, her support for survival has been cut in half.

But the younger son is not thinking about his mother, his father, his family’s honor or his village. He is thinking about himself—what he needs, what he wants, who he hopes he may turn out to be. Staying in relationship is not high on his list of priorities. Being his own person is. Getting out of town to find himself is.

And when “finding his own way” turns out to be a disastrous failure, he realizes that his only chance at life is to return to the house of his father; the father he rejected.

Now if the story were to follow a human pattern of justice, the ending might go something like this:

The returning son appears on the doorstep, and knocks on the door through which he previously came and went as a privileged member of the household. When the door is opened...by a servant, of course, because no respectable master greets guests at the door, the humiliated son humbly begs to speak to his father, and is left unceremoniously on the doorstep while the servant goes to tell the master that an apparently homeless and unsavory person claiming to be his son is at the door. When the father appears at the door, the son begs to be allowed to return home. And the father, having pity on him, agrees to take him back;

but out of fairness for his brother, who remained at home, honored the family name and worked faithfully in the family business, the returning son is granted simply a job;

a humble job that will provide a simple existence and holds no hope for restoration into the line of inheritance.

Seems only fair; and it is, after all, a solution that takes pity on the returning son.

But the parable reveals a Father of an entirely different kind; a Father who is so deeply grieved by the loss of a relationship with his son that he has never stopped watching, hoping and longing for that son's return. A Father who not only seems to ignore the deep insult and disdain shown toward him in the past, but actually seems to have completely discounted and even forgotten the son's disowning of their relationship, greeting him with all the honor and privilege due a full member of the household.

The parable, my dear sisters and brothers, may have been told thousands of years ago, but it is meant for us as much as for those who first heard it.

The father in this parable gives us yet another glimpse of the nature of God; reveals the heart of God that Jesus came to show us.

Jesus is revealing a God who loves us deeply- whether we remain at home, seeking to be dutiful and responsible children of our Father, or wandering prodigals who are convinced we can find better things elsewhere.

In a paraphrase of the words of Pastor David Lose

God loves us – fiercely, vulnerably, courageously...and unendingly. Whether we have wasted opportunity after opportunity or have been quietly working away faithfully and wondering when we'll be noticed, God loves us.

Whether we have welcomed others who are down and out or have judged others for not measuring up, God loves us. Whether we think this news is the best in the world or barely notice it, yet God loves us. Whether we're in the church reluctantly or with joy, whether we have had a lifelong relationship with God, have just come to know God, or aren't even sure God really exists, yet God loves us...truly, madly, and deeply. AND THAT IS GOOD NEWS!