

Today we read the story of the Prodigal Son. It is a very well known Gospel parable. There is something that you need to know about parables in general. Parables are very short little stories. They are fiction. We have never understood them to be true things, in the sense of history or something that really happened in the world. Jesus loved parables. He created them and told them to illustrate truths about God and humanity's relationship with God. Bible scholars refer to the parables of Jesus as the parables of the Kingdom, because, often, Jesus began a parable by saying, "The Kingdom of God is like..." and then told the parable.

Today's parable tells us of a young man, who wanting to be free of parental oversight and out in the world on his own, asked that his father give him his inheritance in advance. The father did so and the young man squandered it all on loose living. Soon he found himself in dire straits and in those circumstances came to his senses. In a nutshell, he returned home and asked his father for a job, a most menial job, anything to put a little food in his stomach and give him shelter for the night. He didn't deserve this, and he knew it. Truth told, he deserved nothing but scorn.

As the parable goes, the father saw the younger son coming. He was delighted. He welcomed him with open arms. Forgiveness was immediate.

The young man had an older brother. That brother was "Mr. Self-righteousness." He was, unfortunately for some of us, typical of older brothers in multi-sibling homes, self-conscious, serious, hard working, focused, incapable of relaxing and having a good time - but above all he was self-righteous. He had always met his father's expectations and more, and he had pleased his father greatly. The older brother did not take it lightly that his younger brother returned home. He took it even less lightly that the father welcomed the younger brother. It did not seem right to him that the wrongdoing of the younger brother was so easily set aside. But his father saw things differently, and the telling thing is the father's comment. His youngest son was lost, but now he was found.

I think that we all realize that the father in this parable is our Father God, and that the younger son represents humanity. There was a time when the church taught that the older son represented the Jewish people, but I'm not sure that we can correctly go there. If anything, I think the older son stands as a reminder that self-righteousness is always wrong and has no place in Christian living. We are all sinners. All of us have fallen short of the Glory of God. One person who understood this very well was John Newton, a one-time slave trader and author of the poem, set to music as the very popular hymn, *Amazing Grace*. After his conversion experience, Newton became a priest of the Church of England. We all know the words to his hymn, "I once was lost, but now I'm found; was blind but now I see." In the parable, the Prodigal Son was once lost but now found, once blind, but now seeing. Not quite as poetic, but insightful and telling is the epitaph that Newton wrote for his tombstone. "John Newton, once an infidel and libertine, was

by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.”

Each of us, in our own way, is like John Newton. Sin is sin, no matter how we try to qualify it. And each of us, through the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, is preserved, restored and pardoned. The prodigal son was preserved, restored and pardoned. Why? Because his father loved him. Our Father God loves us. Nothing delights God more than to receive us and welcome us into his household of love.

What we must realize, though, is that we are undeserving of that love. There is no way that we have earned it or can earn it. It is by grace, through faith, “amazing grace,” that brings us into the family of God. It is by grace, through faith, that we are saved. *Amen.*