

THE OPINION PAGES | OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Prodigal Sons

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We take as our text today the parable of the prodigal sons. As I hope you know, the story is about a father with two sons. The younger son took his share of the inheritance early and blew it on prostitutes and riotous living. When the money was gone, he returned home.

His father ran out and embraced him. The delighted father offered the boy his finest robe and threw a feast in his honor. The older son, the responsible one, was appalled. He stood outside the feast, crying in effect, “Look! All these years I’ve been working hard and obeying you faithfully, and you never gave me special treatment such as this!”

The father responded, “You are always with me, and everything I have is yours.” But he had to celebrate the younger one’s return. The boy was lost and now is found.

Did the father do the right thing? Is the father the right model for authority today?

The father's critics say he was unjust. People who play by the rules should see the rewards. Those who abandon the community, live according to their own reckless desires should not get to come back and automatically reap the bounty of others' hard work. If you reward the younger brother, you signal that self-indulgence pays, while hard work gets slighted.

The father's example is especially pernicious now, the critics continue. Jesus preached it at the time of the Pharisees, in an overly rigid and rule-bound society. In those circumstances, a story of radical forgiveness was a useful antidote to the prevailing legalism.

But we don't live in that kind of society. We live in a society in which moral standards are already fuzzy, in which people are already encouraged to do their own thing. We live in a society with advanced social decay — with teens dropping out of high school, financiers plundering companies and kids being raised without fathers. The father's example in the parable reinforces loose self-indulgence at a time when we need more rule-following, more social discipline and more accountability, not less.

It's a valid critique, but I'd defend the father's example, and, informed by a reading of Timothy Keller's outstanding book "The Prodigal God," I'd even apply the father's wisdom to social policy-making today.

We live in a divided society in which many of us in the middle- and upper-middle classes are like the older brother and many of the people who drop out of school, commit crimes and abandon their children are like the younger brother. In many cases, we have a governing class of elder brothers legislating programs on behalf of the younger brothers. The great danger in this situation is that we in the elder brother class will end up self-righteously lecturing the poor: "You need to be more like us: graduate from school, practice a little sexual discipline, work harder."

But the father in this parable exposes the truth that people in the elder brother class are stained, too. The elder brother is self-righteous, smug, cold and shrewd. The elder brother wasn't really working to honor his father; he was working for material reward and out of a fear-based

moralism. The father reminds us of the old truth that the line between good and evil doesn't run between people or classes; it runs straight through every human heart.

The father also understands that the younger brothers of the world will not be reformed and re-bound if they feel they are being lectured to by unpleasant people who consider themselves models of rectitude. Imagine if the older brother had gone out to greet the prodigal son instead of the father, giving him some patronizing lecture. Do we think the younger son would have reformed his life to become a productive member of the community? No. He would have gotten back up and found some bad-boy counterculture he could join to reassert his dignity.

The father teaches that rebinding and reordering society requires an aggressive assertion: You are accepted; you are accepted. It requires mutual confession and then a mutual turning toward some common project. Why does the father organize a feast? Because a feast is nominally about food, but, in Jewish life, it is really about membership. It reasserts your embedded role in the community project.

The father's lesson for us is that if you live in a society that is coming apart on class lines, the best remedies are oblique. They are projects that bring the elder and younger brothers together for some third goal: national service projects, infrastructure-building, strengthening a company or a congregation.

The father offers each boy a precious gift. The younger son gets to dedicate himself to work and self-discipline. The older son gets to surpass the cold calculus of utility and ambition, and experience the warming embrace of solidarity and companionship.

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