

This story, the story of the prodigal son, is so well known and loved by most people.

It's a long story with lots of details and complicated characters.

You'd think that these facts would make for lots of sermon fodder, and they do, but these facts are precisely why it's such a difficult text to preach on.

For one thing, there are just too many directions in which you can take the story.

And for another thing, us preachers, we like to bring new and fresh perspectives to whatever scripture we are preaching on.

This is difficult to do when you are preaching on such a famous text, it can feel like there's nothing new to say about it.

I am sure that most of you gathered here already have your own thoughts, conclusions and ideas about it.

It's like a well-loved book with lots of tattered pages, coffee stains, notes in the margins and broken binding.

It's been inspected and dissected so many times, what else is there to say about the prodigal son?

Well, I have an idea.

Maybe we should take it back to its roots; to the nugget of wisdom that I think Jesus is trying to teach us once we pull back all the other layers.

In the end, I think Jesus' message is that being in relationship with one another is the most important thing in the world.

It's more important than being right, or being socially acceptable or being fair or even being just.

We were created to be in relationship with one another, and our relationships should be the main priority in our lives.

Think about the creation stories in Genesis, God created one human and realized that there was still something missing, a companion for that human.

I don't care how introverted or anti-social you think you are, relationships are lifeblood for all of us, in our secular lives and in the church.

It's through our relationships that we experience God's abundant love and generosity.

It's through community and relationships that we are Christians together, it's why we worship and serve the world together.

This is the fundamental difference between the father and the older son in this story.

The father understood that at the end of the day, his relationships with his loved ones were all that mattered.

The older son didn't understand this wisdom, as he prioritized being right and being fair or just.

A wise person once said, "Life's not fair, get over it."

I wish that the writer of the Gospel of Luke had written that piece of dialogue into the story, because that's what the older son needed to hear.

The truth is that you'll always have more than some and less than others.

You will work harder than some and receive less for your labors, and you will work less than others and receive more for your labors.

So stop keeping track.

This is one of the many radical ideas about the Gospel message, that we need to stop keeping tabs.

Fairness and equity aren't divinely ordained, they are virtues created by us humans.

If you spend your life comparing yourself to others, whether you have more or less than them, you'll end up the loser either way, here's why...

If you have more than them, then you are the jerk who needed to compare yourself to someone less fortunate than you so you could feel good about yourself.

And if you compare yourself to someone and you conclude that you have less than them, then you'll probably feel some sort of jealousy or resentment and you might even go so far as to waste your time trying to catch up.

Neither of these are desirable outcomes, which is why we shouldn't compare ourselves to each other, it's a lose/lose situation.

And, getting back to Jesus' point about the importance of relationships, comparisons are lethal when it comes to relationships.

Dr. David Lose reflects on this passage and says, *"We track things not because we often need to, but to keep things fair, to make sure things are running right, and out of a concern for equity..."*

*But as important as counting is, sometimes it just doesn't work.*

*Especially in relationships.*

*I mean, imagine counting every good thing someone did for you and using that information to judge how much they love you.*

*Or imagine keeping track of every unhelpful or hurtful thing people in your life do to you and demanding payment...*

*before [the father is] a respectable landowner, he's a parent who loves both his children more than anyone can measure.*

*And that's when counting breaks down.*

*When you love so much there is no scale adequate to calculate your devotion." ([www.davidlose.net](http://www.davidlose.net))*

Considering the world we live in, which values equity and fairness, it's no surprise that the older son is so relatable for many of us.

Yea! We think to ourselves.

Why the heck did that father throw a party for the irresponsible child, he didn't deserve it!

Everyone loves a good turn-around story, but those of us who never did anything that needs to be turned away from, who stayed on the straight-and-narrow, what about us?

Where's our party?

That older son had a right to be mad, he was there, slaving away dutifully for his father, and he gets no rewards or accolades.

But let's really take a minute and think about the eldest son and how he behaves, because upon closer inspection, I am not sure that many of us would want to be him either.

For one thing, if relationships are the most important thing in this world, he's no role model.

He too ends up in metaphorical foreign lands.

He doesn't run away like his younger brother does, but he loses all connection to his brother, his father, and to the community.

It's evident that he doesn't have the closest connection with his father, when he says, "*Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you*" (Luke 15: 29).

If those aren't the words of a resentful child, I don't know what are.

It's not like he was dutifully and joyfully taking care of his older father, feeling blessed with such an honor.

He resented it!

You have to give him credit for being honest and, I guess for not running away, but he's not exactly your ideal offspring either.

Or, as one commentator put it, *"The older son "slaved" for his father, and that's as ugly as it gets.*

*Who loved the father less?*

*Was it the rude younger son who told the old man to drop dead just once or the paint-by-the-numbers older son who spent his every waking moment wishing his father were dead in that he was a cruel slave driver?"* (Hoezee, Scott. Center for Excellence in Preaching. Lent 4C: Feb. 29, 2016).

And then, if his alienation from his father isn't enough, he ostracizes himself from the whole community by not attending his younger brother's celebration.

Everyone is at the party and he would rather be sitting in sackcloth on an ash heap.

When the father comes out of the party and invites the elder son in, he refuses to go inside.

He's the wet blanket at the house party, standing outside with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

If we identify with the older brother, then that's going to be us too, standing out in the cold with only our self-righteousness and our principles to keep us warm.

Sometimes we have to choose being in relationship over being right.

The elder son chose being right, that was his prerogative, but I think Jesus calls us to be like the father.

The father who runs with reckless abandon down the street as soon as he catches a glimpse of his younger son, and cuts him off mid-sentence, because he never ceases loving his ungrateful child.

And, right after greeting a wayward younger son who has undoubtedly caused him many sleepless nights and a broken heart, this father still has love, patience and understanding for his older son.

After he is chastised by his elder son, he responds *'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.'*

*But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'*  
(Luke 15: 32)

There are two stories before this one in the Gospel of Luke, they are both also quite well-known.

We sure do love our parables.

The first one is the story of the lost sheep, and Jesus explains that he would leave 99 sheep go find the lost one, and upon its return, they'd all rejoice together.

The second story is about the woman with the lost coin. She has 10, but then she loses one and she turns her house upside down looking for it.

And when she finds it, she calls all her friends and neighbors together so that they might celebrate with her because she found her missing coin.

All of these stories, about a wayward sheep, a wayward son and a lost coin, they're all about being lost then found, about being separated and then reunited.

They're about being back in relationship with one another.

Today's story is not a story of repentance; in fact I am not convinced that the younger son was sorry for what he did.

I think that he just came home because he had to, because he was hungry, not because he was sorry.

This isn't a repentance story, it's a reunion story.

It's about the high cost of reconciliation, in which individual worth and identity and self-righteousness suddenly lose their place of prominence,

so that those who are as good as dead may have a place at the table, a spot on the dance floor; so that we might all celebrate their reunion.

This is not only our calling as individuals, as Christians, but as the church.

This is the place where we are called to live in community with one another, the lost and the found, the father, the younger son and the older son and even the unnoticed and unnamed, like the mother who I am sure was there somewhere too.

As long as one of our siblings has been broken by the world, cast aside as irrelevant, judged or condemned by the rest of us, then we are all lost, separated from God.

Because the truth is, that at any given point in our lives, we are any of these people.

Our job is not to determine what is just, fair and equitable, our job is to be like the father who extends extravagant love to both his sons without pausing to discern whether they're worthy.

This kind of love is that love that God bestows upon all of us.

So let us emulate God, who is like the father waiting for his son, God who is like the shepherd searching for his lost sheep, God who is like the woman searching for her gold coin.

God will never, ever stop reaching out for the lost and the lonely.

God's love is too wide to exclude anyone, even those we deem unredeemable.

God looks for the one who is lost, not the 99 who have life seemingly all figured out.

Shouldn't we do the same?

(Barreto, Eric. D. "When People You Don't Much Like Receive God's Love," Patheos.com)