

Two Exegeses on the Parable of the Loving Father (also known as Parable of the Prodigal Son)

Gospel of Luke, Chapter 15, Verses 11 to 32

“Love Wins” by Rob Bell, pp. 164–169

A man has two sons. The younger one demands his share of the father’s inheritance early, and the father unexpectedly gives it to him. He takes the money, leaves home, spends it all, and returns home hoping to be hired as a worker in his dad’s business. His father, again unexpectedly, welcomes him home, embraces him, and throws him a homecoming party, fattened calf and all.

Which his older brother refuses to join. It’s unfair, he tells his father, because he’s never even been given a goat, so that he and his friends could have a party. The father then says to him, “You are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

I retell this story of Jesus’s, because of the number of stories being told in this one story.

The younger brother tells a story. It is his version of his story, and as he heads home in shame after squandering his father’s money, he rehearses the speech he’ll give his father. He is convinced he’s “no longer worthy” to be called his father’s son. That’s the story he’s telling, that’s the one he’s believing. It’s stunning, then, when he gets home and his father demands that the best robe be put on him and a ring placed on his finger and sandals on his feet. Robes and rings and sandals are signs of being a son. Although he’s decided he can’t be a son anymore, his father tells a different story. One about return and reconciliation and redemption. One about his being a son again.

The younger son has to decide whose version of his story he’s going to trust: his or his father’s. One in which he is no longer worthy to be called a son or one in which he’s a robe-, ring-, and sandal-wearing son who was dead but is alive again, who was lost but has now been found.

There are two versions of his story.

His.

And his father’s.

He has to choose which one he will live in.

Which one he will believe.

Which one he will trust.

Same, it turns out, for the older brother.

He too has his version of his story.

He tells his father, “All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours

(he can’t even say his brother’s name)

who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

So much in so few words. One senses he’s been saving it up for years, and now out it comes, with venom.

First, in his version of events, he’s been slaving for his father for years. That’s how he describes life in his father’s house: slaving. That directly contradicts the few details we’ve been given about the father, who appears to be anything but a slave driver.

Second, he says his father has never even given him a goat. A goat doesn’t have much meat on it, so even in conjuring up an image of celebration, it’s meager. Lean. Lame. The kind of party he envisions just isn’t that impressive. What he reveals here is what he really thinks about his father: he thinks he’s cheap.

Third, he claims that his father has dealt with his brother according to a totally different set of standards. He thinks his father is unfair. He thinks he’s been wronged, shorted, shafted. And he’s furious about it.

All with the party in full swing in the background.

The father isn’t rattled or provoked. He simply responds, “My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.” And then he tells him that they have to celebrate.

“You are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”

In one sentence the father manages to tell an entirely different story about the older brother.

First, the older son hasn’t been a slave. He’s had it all the whole time. There’s been no need to work, obey orders, or slave away to earn what he’s had the whole time.

Second, the father hasn’t been cheap with him. He could have had whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it. Everything the father owns has always been his, which includes, of course, fattened calves. All he had to do was receive.

Third, the father redefines fairness. It’s not that his father hasn’t been fair with him; it’s that his father never set out to be fair in the first place. Grace and generosity aren’t fair; that’s their very essence. The father sees the younger brother’s return as one more occasion to practice unfairness. The younger son doesn’t deserve a party—that’s the point of the party. That’s how things work in the father’s world. Profound unfairness.

People get what they don’t deserve.

Parties are thrown for younger brothers who squander their inheritance.

After all, “You are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”

What the father does is retell the older brother’s story. Just as he did with the younger brother. The question, then, is the same question that confronted the younger brother—will he trust his version of his story or his father’s version of his story?

Who will he trust?

What will he believe?

The difference between the two stories is,

after all,

the difference between heaven . . . and hell.

“Divine Renovation Beyond the Parish’ by Fr. James Mallon, pp. 76–93

As you begin to reflect on this parable, think about how those listening to Jesus would have received it. These listeners were part of Jesus’ culture and were attuned to certain cultural realities that today’s readers often miss. They would have immediately recognized, for example, that Jesus stacked the deck against this young man. He set up the story in such a way that his audience would be disgusted, not only by the actions of the younger son but also by the younger son himself. Jesus’ listeners would have zero sympathy for this ungrateful man.

As the story opens, the younger son asks his father to give him his inheritance. Instantly the son is on thin ice with Jesus’ listeners. Generally, only the older brother would receive an inheritance, not the younger, and only after the father died. By asking his father this question, the younger son basically declared that his father was as good as dead to him. Imagine how transgressive such a request would appear in a culture where respect for parents was written in the Mosaic law and where lack of respect was punishable by death.

Anyone hearing this story would have been shocked by the behavior of the younger son, but even more, they would have been surprised by the father’s reaction. Instead of sending his son into exile, imprisoning him, or even putting him to death, the father allows the son to leave with half his property.

Scandalizing as these facts are, Jesus ups the ante. The younger son does not simply disrespect and shame his father; he also disrespects his family and the land of Israel, which was deeply connected to Jewish identity. He chooses to leave the country and live among Gentiles. He has essentially rejected his identity as an Israelite. Furthermore, the younger son lives an immoral lifestyle in the foreign land where he settles, further alienating himself from God and bringing shame on himself.

As if that is not enough, when famine hits, the younger son hires himself out to feed pigs. At this point, we can imagine that the Jews listening to this parable would have been beside themselves. Mosaic law regarded pigs as unclean animals, and yet the son not only tends the swine but also contemplates eating their food. The only reason he does not, according to the story, is that no one offers him any.

There is almost nothing redeeming about this young man—except, perhaps, the fact that he eventually decides to repent. A careful reading of the story, though, reveals that his “conversion” was not particularly authentic. Exhausted, tired, and hungry, the young man thinks back to his father’s house and recalls that even the servants there had enough food. In other words, his repentance is motivated by self-interest.

He is truly a wretch!

Ten Revelations about the Father

Yet something powerful happens when the young man decides to return to his father. As we proceed with the story, we find that Jesus makes points about the father that give us a glimpse of the heart of his Father and, in turn, offer us a vision for his Church.

He Is Outward Looking

We hear in the parable that “While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him” (Luke 15:20). The father was facing outward toward the world; he had positioned himself to see his son as he approached. He was not turned inward, focused solely on the concerns of his household.

In the same way, the fundamental orientation of the Church must be outward. According to this parable of Jesus, the orientation of God the Father is outward; this is the orientation of love. We discussed this already in the introduction, when we distinguished between maintenance and mission.

Of course, we must maintain the flock, but when we deny this outward orientation as a Church, when we focus our resources primarily on our inner life, we become sick. We experience the symptoms of this sickness today. Earlier we used a malfunctioning photocopier, jammed and overheated, as an image of parishes that are turned in on themselves. This pull to be insider focused is normal and powerful. If we are not constantly intentional about maintaining a missionary posture, so many internal issues compete for our attention as leaders that we become exhausted and have nothing left for the outsider.

This inward focus is too often the norm in our Church. I recently went through my Twitter feed and came across a tweet from a relatively well-known Catholic. He wrote that he just wanted to be friends with people on “Catholic Twitter” so that we could pray for each other and help each other become saints. Does that not sound laudable and holy? It is good to be friends, to pray for one another, and to encourage each other to greater holiness. Who could argue with that sentiment?

At the same time, think about the implications of labeling this communication tool “Catholic Twitter,” as if it is a club for Catholic insiders. Twitter is not a private chat room; it is a public forum. It is a tool for social engagement. Holiness is good, but it is not enough. We are called to holiness and to mission, not to one or the other. We must live out these two truths at the same time.

I yearn for a time when we will say that “Catholic Twitter” should disappear, and we should see ourselves as Catholics on Twitter, no longer an insider’s club but heralds of the gospel to an increasingly digitized world. Social media—whether on Twitter or other platforms—is increasingly a very self-referential place, impenetrable to people on the outside, similar in a way to many of our parishes.

This way of thinking is problematic and symbolic of an inward focus. When Christians are inward focused rather than outward focused, our concerns and conversations become unhealthy. It is no surprise that when people on the outside of the Catholic world look in on Catholic social media, they are unlikely to find it an attractive place, burdened as it is by criticism, judgment, and infighting.

It does not have to be that way. Changing direction means changing from an inward to an outward focus.

He Is Vigilant

Not only did the father see the son, but he caught sight of him from a long way off. In other words, the father was not simply oriented outward; he was also scanning the horizon. This was not passive gazing. The father was attentive: he was awake and keeping watch. I can imagine him climbing up on the roof of his house every day and looking longingly down the road, finally catching sight of his son as soon as he came into view.

Are we focused on looking for men and women who are returning to God? Are we vigilant? Are we looking at all?

Ultimately this point about vigilance is a challenge for us as parishes and dioceses. Even when we do look outward, sometimes the farthest we get is the front door or the parking lot. The father's gaze, however, sees his son when he is a long way off. What does that mean for us as a Church as we reflect on the call to be missionary?

He Is Moved

Scripture tells us that when the father caught sight of his son, he “was filled with compassion” (Luke 15:20). The word that St. Luke uses here is derived from the Greek noun *splankna* (σπλάγχνα), which essentially means the bowels, intestines, or the innards. It is a visceral, *feeling* word in the Scriptures, referring to something that happens not in the heart but deep inside the guts. It is a difficult word to translate but one that Luke also uses to describe the movement of the heart of God in the *Benedictus*, the Song of Zachariah:

In the tender compassion (*splankna*) of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us. (Luke 1:78, Liturgy of the Hours)

Luke uses this word again to describe the compassion of the good Samaritan in that parable (see Luke 10:33). A variation of the word describes what Jesus experiences when he sees the crowds who are like sheep without a shepherd (see Matthew 9:36). And when he encountered the widow of Nain, *esplanknisthe* (ἐσπλαγγνίσθη)—“he was moved” (Luke 7:13). What was true of the compassion of Jesus in his ministry is a reflection of the heart of God the Father.

In light of this, we must ask ourselves as a Church—as dioceses and parishes—do we care? Is that care visceral? Are we moved by the plight of people who are lost?

I know that we are sometimes uncomfortable using the word “lost” to describe people who are not connected with Jesus or the Church. It sounds as if we are passing judgment on them. I want to be clear that it is beyond our pay grade, so to speak, to pass judgement on others, grade their relationship with God, or forecast their eternal destiny. However, we do know that knowing Jesus makes a difference in this world and the next.

Foundationally, we are created by love, in love, and for love. Our hearts are fashioned to fit within the Father's heart. Jesus is the icon of the Father, and because we come to the Father through him, all humanity is lost unless we come “home” to the Father's love. In Jesus we discover our deepest identity, our truest purpose, and our ultimate destiny. Outside of Jesus, we live disconnected from those things and will never be able to fulfill our deepest longing for peace, perfect love, forgiveness—all the realities found in the home of the Father.

The use of “lost” reflects the language of Jesus himself: “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). I encourage you to pray with the Scriptures, to come before the Father and ask him to help you be at peace with this language that describes the essence of Jesus’ mission.

Many years ago, in the parish I pastored before Saint Benedict, we were holding an Alpha session one night in the parish hall. Sixty or so guests were attending, half of whom were disconnected from the Church, did not go to Mass, and did not go to any other church. They were coming in from the outside.

We asked a particular ministry that was meeting on the same night to use the basement of the church. Before we had started Alpha in the parish, this ministry had had a near monopoly on the use of parish facilities. They went down to the basement very reluctantly.

When the time came for the Alpha session to break into small groups, we sent two or three of the groups downstairs to some small meeting rooms. In order to get there, the people had to walk through the meeting space of the ministry we had consigned to the basement, temporarily interrupting that gathering. The woman who was in charge of this ministry group came upstairs immediately and confronted me. She was very angry.

I listened to the woman, trying my best to be patient. When I could get a word in, I asked her to think about it this way: The people who are here for Alpha often don’t go to any church, and some of them don’t even believe in God. Yet they are here, and they are our guests. So many of these folks are young, I remarked, and they are here to learn about Jesus and his Church. Isn’t that incredible?

It took the woman only a second to respond. She rose up in my face and screamed, “*I don’t care!*”

In that moment, I realized something: this woman really did not care. Maybe in the heat of the moment, her anger got the best of her, but at face value, she did not care. She was not moved by the thing that moves God the most.

That was a profound experience for me. I had been concerned for a long time about what this woman thought of me and my decisions, and now I felt a freedom I had never felt before. She did not care, and now I did not have to worry about her approval.

As a Church, we must care about—be moved by—the fact that so many people are far from God and not yet established in the Father’s house.

He Goes to the Son

As we read in the story, the father did not simply wait for his son to knock on the door, nor did he just go to the son; he ran to him. This was a rather undignified action for the head of a household in ancient times, especially because the son was a complete wretch.

Do we as a Church run out to those headed toward us, or are we satisfied to merely open the doors of the Church and hope those on the outside drift in? So often the best of our parishes do the latter, failing to realize that the obstacles preventing people from coming into our parishes are bigger than they have ever been. We are basically saying to the world, “We’re not going to you; you can come to us.”

It is almost as if we expect nonchurchgoers and nonbelievers to be the missionaries, rather than the Church. “Leave your comfort zone, and come to us,” we say in effect to those on the outside. “We’re not going to leave our comfort zones and go to you.”

Rather than saying to those on the outside, come in, what we as Church need to do is throw open the doors and say to the people on the inside, get out! Indeed, is that not what we do at the end of every Mass? That is the *missa*! The words of sending—*ite, missa est*—used to be the very last words of Mass. That is where we find the root of the word “Mass” (*missio*). At the end of every single celebration of the Eucharist, we essentially say to the Church of God, “Get out and go to people. Serve them in love, care for them, befriend them. And when people ask you for the reason for your hope, reply, ‘Come and see,’ and invite them to return home.”

I think of the analogy of a fishing boat, something very real to me because, in Nova Scotia, we have lots of fishing communities. Imagine that the Church, called by Jesus to be fishers of men and women, is a fleet of fishing boats. One of our primary purposes is to set out to catch people, just as the first followers of Jesus caught fish on the Sea of Galilee. Rather than going out into the deep and putting down our nets for a catch, however, we are tied up in the harbor. If we do manage to catch a fish, it is because that fish has swum into the harbor and jumped into the boat, causing us to say, “Oh, my goodness, what the heck is that?”

Frankly, we do not know what to do with that kind of fish other than flick it into the RCIA program or a similar ministry. The Church resembles a fishing fleet that never goes out to sea!

This is a major problem, but we are seeing change in a positive direction.

A number of years ago, for example, Christ the King parish in Ann Arbor, Michigan, joined our coaching network. It is a wonderful parish that has produced more vocations to the priesthood and religious life than perhaps any other parish in the United States in the last twenty or thirty years. It probably has one of the highest proportions of committed disciples of any parish in the United States. It is a community of holy people.

But the parish realized that, although many members were doing some form of evangelization, as a parish they had become self-referential. As a body, they had forgotten about mission. Their parish purpose statement underscored this reality: it was to be a parish for committed Catholics. By inference, therefore, the not so committed would have to go somewhere else. As a result, the parish was perceived as irrelevant to people on the outside and even a bit judgmental.

Christ the King joined our coaching network, and it has become a parish that is not only holy but also mission oriented. Instead of locking themselves in a holy huddle, parish members are increasingly able to reflect the heart of the Father and go to those on the outside.

He Does Not Focus on the Son’s Repentance

Remember that the son’s repentance was inauthentic, based on his need rather than contrition. When the father goes to him and embraces him, the son rattles off his repentance—perhaps he has even rehearsed it. When he does this, it is as if the father is not even listening. He cuts the son off and tells his servants to get the finest robes for his son and rings for his fingers.

These were symbols of familial status. The father was clothing the young man once again in his dignity as son and heir. He restored the son to the family without making reference to his repentance or making the son squirm in any way.

Without a doubt, I have had some amazing encounters as a priest celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I have been privy to moments of unspeakable anguish and breathtaking beauty. Sometimes though, when people make an act of contrition and dwell with grizzly detail on how they really deserve to be punished by God, I wonder what this says about their image of God. Many seem to think of God as vindictive and angry. This is not the God revealed in the parable of the prodigal son.

Once, when I was a young priest, I made my confession, and the priest chastised me for not using a version of the Act of Contrition that he thought was the proper one. I was humiliated. Perhaps there are people who can identify with that experience. As I pray through the fifteenth chapter of Luke, I am struck again by the reality that the father is not even paying attention to the son's contrition. I am unsure how to process that theologically. We know that Jesus does demand repentance, but I think we need to process it spiritually and emotionally. The father did not humiliate the son. He did not make him squirm. He did not focus on the repentance, let alone on the sin.

What does that say to us when it comes to the kind of Church God is calling us to be? It does not mean that we disregard the reality of sin or move into moral relativism. However, it does invite us to be as gentle with others in their sin and brokenness as God has been to us, and to reflect on how well we, as parishes and dioceses, reflect the heart of the Father to others.

He Makes No Reproach

If I was the father in this parable, I probably would have gone down to the basement to watch Netflix or something as soon as I caught sight of my son. When the young man came in, I would have made a sarcastic comment. Something like "Oh, you're back? I told you so."

That is not the father that Jesus reveals in the story. There simply is no reproach in the heart of the father.

Looking back on my own ministry, when I was perhaps less wise, I want to cringe. I reproached people a lot, not actively but often in a passive-aggressive manner. For example, priests face an emotional struggle twice a year—at Christmas and Easter—when our churches fill up with people. At those times, I made lots of lighthearted but pointed comments about how we do this every week and not just twice a year, or how we decorate our sanctuary with more than just Easter lilies and poinsettias. These comments were reproaches disguised as good-natured humor.

I have since repented of this attitude, and now I try to better deal with that movement in my heart. I have realized that in those moments, I was taking things personally, as if people were rejecting me. In a sense, I took offense. Authentic and divinely rooted love, on the other hand, takes no offense (see 1 Corinthians 13:5). The heart of the Father is pure love.

This reality can challenge our image of God the Father, especially if we were raised with an understanding that when we sin, we offend God. In an ontological sense, we can say that sin is always an offense to God, who is all holy and all loving. Many people today, however, lack the philosophical and theological context that would help them understand the nuances behind the concept of what it means to offend God. For most people, the word "offend" will be placed in the context of personal relationships. When we "offend" somebody, we really put them off; we do something that makes them angry with us.

In this personal and relational sense, God is not offended by our sin; there is no reproach. If therefore we as a Church are going to reflect the Father's heart to the world, then we have to

wrestle with the vision of being a Church that does not reproach the sinner in search of forgiveness—even if we feel they have not expressed contrition in the way we think is most appropriate.

He Has a Sense of Urgency

When the father commands his servants to put a robe on his son and rings on his son's fingers, he says to do so "quickly." There is no time to be lost. Quickly put sandals on his feet. Quickly, quickly, quickly.

We see in this urgency a reminder that the father ran to the son and a larger reminder that reconciliation, restoration, and celebration are urgent tasks of the Church. St. Paul says that we are "ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

How it grieves my heart when even parishes that we work with in our ministry say that they will get to that evangelization thing at some point—maybe in a year, maybe in two. Where is the sense of urgency? It is the most important thing that we can do. Please do not put it off.

Make it one of the first things you do—and not just for the folks within the walls of your parish. I know that some parishes embrace a strategy that says, "Let's reach the people on the inside first." We cannot, however, simply put off the mission to those on the outside. We must reflect the heart of the Father, becoming the kind of Church we are called to be.

I heard a story about someone who went to his bishop to speak about the future of Alpha in the diocese. The bishop said that because they did not have any plans for what to do with people after Alpha, they should not start any new ones—just keep the ones that were presently going. I was perplexed by this. It is as if you are in a lifeboat and decide not to rescue any more people because there are not enough blankets and supplies to care for them.

No, you go and rescue the drowning people! Rescue people first, and then figure out the rest. We need to call on the Holy Spirit to restore in the Church—in us—a deep sense of urgency that flows from the Father's fierce love for his children.

He Kills the Fatted Calf

The killing of the fatted calf signified the start of a celebration, and celebration—specifically, what we celebrate—shapes the culture of any organization, including our parishes and dioceses. When we celebrate a person, event, process, or milestone, we communicate its value to us. In other words, celebration is a form of reward, so we should strive to be intentional about celebrating the right things.

In this parable, Jesus tells us what God celebrates: the return of the lost. For God it is the most important thing. How does that compare to our priorities as Church? What do we celebrate?

Often we celebrate whoever has been around the longest: "This person has been here for twenty-five years; let's give him a medal. This other person has been here forty years; let's give her two medals." The people who have returned to the Church do not even get a mention. This is not what God celebrates.

Look at the whole of Luke, chapter fifteen. Jesus offers three parables: the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son. These parables have several things in common: something has been lost, something has been found, and there is a party.

The woman in the parable of the lost coin invites her neighbors to come and have a party when she finds the lost coin. Here is the great irony: the woman finds one coin, and she likely spends two coins to throw a party because she found the one coin. This is the economy of the kingdom of God; it is how God operates.

The question remains: how do we as a parish, as a diocese, and beyond celebrate what God celebrates and not just celebrate ourselves? How do we celebrate when we reach people who are on the outside?

We have done this over the years at Saint Benedict Parish through testimonies—written testimonies in our monthly magazine and in our annual financial report, testimonies delivered at special events such as prayer breakfasts, and even testimonies given after the homily at Mass several times a year, especially as we launch a new season of Alpha. The most important thing for us as a parish is helping people encounter Jesus Christ in a life-changing way and returning, or coming for the first time, to the Church and the sacraments. That's what we celebrate.

When we first started doing this, we experienced a lot of pushback. People were uncomfortable with it; they said, "We're Catholic, we don't do this. This is not what we celebrate." Other people were upset that we were celebrating the return of the lost and not the presence of the perennially faithful. In spite of this, we kept doing it.

And over the years, the attitude has changed. The celebration of people's return to Jesus is now an integral part of parish life at Saint Benedict.

He Has a Heart for the Older Brother

Throughout most of my ministry as a pastor, I have struggled with the "older brother" type, the one who starts to complain when the focus of the parish shifts outward and the community starts to celebrate the return of the prodigals. I found it difficult to be compassionate, loving, and patient with these older brothers. I would be frustrated by their anger and seeming blindness to the importance of the prodigal's return.

About two years ago, I was praying through the text of this parable, and it struck me: the father has the same heart for the older brother as he does for the prodigal! I came to see that if the father had a deep love for them, then so should I.

The reality is that our parishes are filled with older brothers. You might not notice it until your parish starts to focus on mission. Once a community adopts a sense of urgency, raises its focus beyond the walls of the parish, and starts to bear fruit, the older brothers will emerge, and they tend to not be happy. The idea that leaders would choose not to focus all their attention on the nurturing, celebration, and safety of the current community, and instead invest time, money, and resources into mission, is foreign to them.

Yet Jesus himself said, "What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it?" (Luke 15:4). I often imagine Jesus sharing this parable and those listening bursting into laughter. For right-thinking shepherds, it is a preposterous proposition. The answer to Jesus' question is quite simple: no one would leave their entire flock to search for one lost sheep. These shepherds would have invested their whole livelihood into their flock. They would not jeopardize their investment on a fool's errand, chasing one sheep. Forget the one; it's an acceptable loss.

The Father's perspective is fundamentally different.

Let us take a moment to reflect on who the older brother was in the parable and who these older brothers are in our parishes. Start by considering where the older brother had come from when he asked the servant what was happening. He came from the fields. He was working.

We discover that the older brother is dutiful. He never left home; he followed all the rules. In fact, he is so upset at the father's response to the prodigal son that he tells his father that he himself worked like a slave. Clearly he is hardworking, dedicated, and faithful. These are all wonderful things.

Yet if we look beneath the words of the older brother, we see what is going on in his heart. Underneath his dutiful obedience lie bitterness, anger, and resentment. That is why the older brother goes into a rage when he finds out that the father has killed the fatted calf and is throwing a party in honor of his brother. He worked hard for the father, but he never felt he received anything in return. This is not the mindset of a son but the mindset of a servant or slave. That is the core problem with the older brother: he does not know who he is!

Thus when the father pleads with the older brother, he is trying to restore his son's identity in a way that is different from how he handled the prodigal son but based on the same principles. Both the prodigal and the older son suffer from identity issues. They are acting and living in a manner that is inconsistent with who they are.

The father used robes and rings, the symbols of family, to let the prodigal know who he was and to restore him. As he pleads with the older brother, he tries to confirm his identity as well: "You're my son. Everything I have is yours. What do you mean, I never gave you gold, or killed the fatted calf for you and your friends? It's your gold and your calf. It all belongs to you. Don't you understand? You are not a slave! You are my son!"

We hear this message throughout the Scriptures, especially in Paul's Letter to the Romans: "You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back in fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, 'Abba, Father!'" (8:15). St. Paul also speaks of being freed from the slavery of sin, and this imagery resonated with people in the ancient world. During that time, you either owned a slave or were a slave yourself. Also, your fortunes could change. If, for example, you did not pay your debt, you could be sold into slavery.

This was the economy of Paul's day. Yet he spent a great deal of time letting the world know that it had been bought and paid for. Jesus paid our debt, not with something perishable, like silver or gold, but with his own body and blood. He did not stop there, however. Jesus did not just set us free, but he adopted us into a family. Not just any family, but the family of the King.

It gets better. We have been adopted, and the King has promised us that we will receive an inheritance. For this we do not need to wait, for he has made a down payment on this inheritance by sending us his Holy Spirit, so that we can know that we are truly sons and daughters, not slaves.

Yet in the Church today, there are perhaps many slaves: dutiful believers who have met every obligation placed upon them by the Church. Perhaps they have never disobeyed a single commandment. They "work in the fields" out of duty, not understanding their identity. And so they become frustrated and angry when we start celebrating the return of prodigals.

These believers fail to realize that they are sons and daughters not because of their good behavior or correct belief but because of the scandalous nature of God's mercy and grace. That mercy and

grace is brazenly laid before them in the celebration of the unworthy prodigals who come back to us.

I confess that I sympathize with their frustration. After all, God's mercy is not fair. It does not make sense from a human perspective. However, this is the mind and heart of God. If our Church is to be renewed at every level, mercy must be infused throughout all our systems and structures.

The Church cannot simply dismiss the outrage and agony of our older brothers. We need to have compassion for them, as the father of the prodigal son had compassion on the older brother. We need to plead with them to join the party, to recognize and celebrate the miracle of the return of those who were lost and have been found.

He Insists on the Party

While it is true that the father has a heart for the older brother, the party must go on. Here is the point: the father does not back down from this key value. The fatted calf is killed, and the household is going to party.

The great drama of this parable stems from the fact that we do not know how it ends. We do not know if the older brother joins the party or storms off in a rage.

A year ago, I spoke to a group about this parable, and I made this specific point. At a break, a man came up to me and said, "Fr. James, I beg to differ with you, because we do know how the story ends."

I asked him to tell me, and he replied, "The older brother kills the father."

Now, that may seem like a shocking and unrealistic turn of the narrative, and yet the scribes and the Pharisees killed Jesus. From an earthly perspective, the religious leaders of Jesus' day played an active role in the death of Jesus because he was hanging out with tax collectors and sinners instead of confirming and affirming the religiously faithful.

Within every religious structure lies the possibility of self-righteousness, especially for those who feel they must make themselves acceptable before God will bestow his love. Add in the belief that we become acceptable to God through hard work, performance, and obedience, and you have the ingredients for our current situation: we literally believe that we make ourselves righteous.

A Church that misunderstands grace becomes a self-righteous Church. It does not make room for the broken, the lost, and the less than perfect, and it is intolerant of those who do.

In order to become a Church that is motivated by and reflects the Father's heart as revealed in the parable of the prodigal son, we must allow our hearts of stone to be transformed into hearts of flesh (see Ezekiel 36:26). Only the Holy Spirit can bring about this change as he brings us into the embrace of the Father. If we are to be a Church that reflects the compassion of the Father, we need to be a Church made up of people who have encountered the merciful heart of the Father.

A Prodigal Comes Home

I want to conclude with a story of a young woman at Saint Benedict Parish. Three years ago, this woman went through a difficult time in her life. She had gone through a marriage breakup and found herself, as a single mother, suffering from postpartum depression. She had also sustained a brain injury in an accident.

This woman had been raised in the Church but had walked away from it when she was a teenager. One day she walked past Saint Benedict, and she decided the following weekend to come to Mass.

Over a year ago, I was at a gathering of parish leaders when one of our staff members read a letter that he had received from her. I would like to share a bit of Jen's story with you. She started off:

I am probably the most under qualified person there is to write anything about God. I don't know a whole lot about religion, so to speak. I don't know many Bible verses by heart. I don't know the details of Catholicism. I don't even know how to say the Rosary, but I'm eager to learn. That being said, these are the things I do know, as sure as I am breathing: I know that the power of God is amazing. I know that I am not in control of my life. I know that God is always with me. I know that God uses people in beautiful ways, and I know that God isn't trying to punish me. I know that God loves me—although that was a tough one to accept.

This letter was filled with hard-won wisdom, of which this was just a part. She continued to describe her life's journey to that point:

One Sunday morning, when my daughter was just about a year old, I found myself at Saint Benedict Parish. Those months were such a blur that I don't even know how that happened. I was well enough to function, but nowhere near out of the darkness. I remember walking through the doors and being so scared. I was desperate. That was my last hope, and I was terrified, because I knew that if this last-ditch effort to give God a chance and give my life a chance failed, I didn't know if I would bounce back.

I don't know how many months I attended Mass in the foyer. My daughter was barely one, and I thought, what if she makes too much noise? What if these people realize I'm a complete mess? Or that I'm a single mother? What if they're unkind? I couldn't take the chance, so I didn't go any further, but I stood in the foyer and hung on every word that was spoken. I cried every time the band would sing about God's love or brokenness. I desperately wanted to believe in God's love, but I didn't think it was for me.

I remember Fr. James and Fr. Simon speaking about God's love with such conviction, but I was convinced they were talking about someone else. I wasn't worthy. I was ashamed. God couldn't love me.

Eventually I built up enough courage to go inside, not ready to take the plunge yet and actually sit. We hung around the back of the church. I wanted so badly to be a part of whatever this was. I remember thinking, is this for real? These people are so nice. Where is the hidden camera; what's the catch?

There are people like Jen all over our communities: people who are desperate, who feel lost. They may not be able to use those words, they might not be able to put their finger on what they are experiencing, but they are lost.

Sadly, many people see our parishes as the last place they would want to go. They believe they would not be welcomed. They see our parishes as places where they would experience condemnation and judgment, not as places where they could encounter the compassion of God the Father. I find this truly tragic.

Jen went on to describe how she eventually sat in the pew and experienced welcome during her time visiting our parish. In her time with us, she heard me (and other parishioners) speak over and over again about Alpha. She decided to attend and had a profound, life-changing encounter with Jesus and experience of God's love.

Today Jen is very active in our parish. She often comes to weekday Mass. She leads a ministry to reach mothers in the community and is the emcee at our Alpha right now. She is impacting many people around her. Some of the mothers from her group who were not churchgoers took Alpha. One came into the Church at the Easter Vigil last year and another is serving on the Alpha team this year.

Jen's is one of many incredible stories that I could share with you. I believe hers is a story that can help us imagine what kind of Church we can be, what kind of fruit we can bear as parishes and dioceses when we more fully reflect the Father's heart.