

The story of the Prodigal Son is one you can likely visualize in your mind's eye. The supremely forgiving, wealthy, and fabulously generous father: a reassuring and deeply comforting figure, representing the possibility of return to a safe and welcoming place, even though the younger son consciously and intentionally chose to walk away; the possibility of return to a safe and welcoming relationship, even though the younger son made a string of entirely questionable decisions. We might even roll our eyes as the older son gripes about not having been gifted even a goat with which to entertain his friends ... we might then nod along in warm-hearted agreement as the father reminds his disgruntled older child that all that is his he shares freely with his son, he doesn't really have anything to complain about.

Although the compassionate, forgiving father is surely part of what we're to take from this story, I'm just not buying this is the primary point Jesus intended for us to hear in this parable.

I'm not entirely sure what it says about me, but when I hear the younger son's thinking about possible next steps, once he's got nothing left of his share of the inheritance, and has to work as a laborer, and is jealous of the food he's feeding to the pigs, I visualize a schemer - someone raised in wealth and privilege, who'll do or say whatever he needs to to get back on top. There's nothing in the gospel text that convinces me the younger son has had a true conversion of heart when he decides to journey home and apologize to his father. I interpret his repentance as transactional: he's completely out of cash, he's hungry, so he decides to chance his arm with a big old groveling apology for his dad.

And so, equipped with a plan, he heads back to his father's estate.

And it all goes remarkably well for him. I realize this isn't in the text, but in my mind, the younger son is surprised, thrilled even when his father spots him while he's still a ways away, and then lets him know with a hug and a kiss that all is ok, he is forgiven. I imagine, this makes actually saying the words of apology, the younger son has perhaps rehearsed all the way home, I imagine it makes saying those words so much easier.

And I imagine the older son knows his younger sibling only too well. So, when he hears about the lavish celebrations in honor of his return, it's no wonder he's a bit miffed.

The father in this story may be a figure of reassuring comfort and compassion, but I think it's the older son who is teaching us the lesson.

We live in a society built on certain foundational ideas, and one of those is the enduring belief that we live in world in which, by and large, folks should get what they deserve, that actions will result in appropriate consequences – that the bad folks among us will get their comeuppance, and good folks, they'll ultimately be rewarded.¹

We see this play out in children's stories and in movies, *and* in the very real and harmful social judgement of folks whose lives are hard. There's a pervasive underlying assumption or belief that poverty, folks struggling with employment, or housing, or struggling with substances, living amidst violence and being a victim of that violence, is all somehow bound up in the bad decisions or actions of the ones suffering. Because "we get what we deserve."

¹ See this article for an overview of the "Just World Hypothesis": <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/the-just-world-theory/>

In a similar vein, those who live in comfort and economic security, whose lives are comparatively stable, those folks are reaping the reward of their good decision-making, their commitment to education, their hard work and their effort. Because “we get what we deserve.”

And yet, in last week’s Gospel reading, Jesus breaks from this idea: bad things happen to those who do bad and those who don’t, he tells us; we should all definitely repent, but not to prevent bad things from happening to us, because bad things can just happen; we should repent, turn back to God, as a choice to live fully, however life might unfold; not to avoid ‘punishment’ or to somehow get a ‘reward.’

This week, Jesus’ parable seems to be saying that very good, rather wonderful things can and do happen to those we might consider to be ‘undeserving’ – we might want the younger son to be truly repentant, but I’d argue the evidence for that just isn’t in the text. I think, Jesus wants us to linger with the response of the older son, who’s saying “wait a minute, he doesn’t deserve all that, I do.”

Where’s the celebration, the lavish reward for his dutiful life, his commitment, loyalty, and hard work?

I think Jesus wants us to really wrestle with our ideas of who deserves what.

Wrestle with the reality that sometimes really good things can happen for folks we might not think deserve it all.

Jesus also seems to be saying here, if we’ve been living for a reward, making choices and acting to get something in return, if we’ve been

doing our duty and living in hopes of special treatment or favor from God, we might have missed the point;

also, if we wanna see retribution, just deserts, punishment, comeuppance for those we believe have done wrong, have acted badly, people who 'deserve' to be punished, we're missing the point – as Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, God makes his sun rise on the evil and good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

If, deep down and sometimes even unconsciously, we hold the belief that God serves up life events and material circumstances that are 'deserved,' we're likely to be only too happy to take it upon ourselves to make sure "justice is done" if God doesn't seem to be stepping in appropriately. Our world's thirst for retribution is surely enmeshed in the belief that all people should get what they deserve. And retribution and violence are unavoidably interlinked.

We are stuck in a cycle of violence that's 'justified' by the belief that folks should get what they deserve, a cycle of violence that changes as different groups, different people, people with different ideologies cycle round into positions of power and influence; it changes but it doesn't end. Jesus' Way breaks that cycle, calling us to transform in love, to recognize the power of restoration over retribution.

Society trains us to respond with compassion to those we believe *deserve* our love and compassion; and so perhaps the most pointed aspect of today's parable, its most unsettling and uncomfortable call is for us to examine our response to those who have much, and still are given more, despite who they are, what they've done and in spite of the fact we honestly believe they don't deserve any of it,

Society trains us to respond with compassion to those we believe *deserve* our love and compassion; Jesus, on the other hand, is teaching us that if we're to truly participate in the transformation of the world, we're to figure out how to change our hearts and minds, change our habits of thinking and doing so we might, at some point, know what it is to love everyone, whether they deserve it or not. Love your enemies, Jesus says ... expecting nothing in return.²

Expecting nothing, perhaps, but trusting in the promise a less violent, more just and fully inclusive world.

Following Jesus is not easy, but it is the Way. Amen.

² Luke 6:35