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The Parable of the Prodigal Son

by

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Signature of Director

Dr. Charles A. Bobertz, Ph. D.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

This project began with the investigation of the role of parables in the teachings of Jesus Christ. I researched the function of parables and the different levels of interpretation. Then I studied the Parable of the Prodigal Son in depth looking at the parable through a window into the past and reflecting on the meaning that the parable had in history and then looking at it like a reflection in a mirror to see what the parable has to say to us today.

The research included a look at the characters of the parable and the roles they played in the literal, metaphorical and allegorical levels. The gaps in the parable also play a profound role in the interpretation.

After studying the different angles of the parable, it was amazing how this story is still relevant today, maybe even more relevant in our global world.

This paper may be duplicated.

Signature of the Student Writer

Date

We have all heard or read at least some of the biblical parables. We may even be so familiar with them that, when we start to hear them read or read them ourselves, we say: “Oh yes, I know this one.” What is it about a parable that can be so confusing or unnerving? They have an unexpected twist that makes us stop and think; “I know this but I don’t like it.” The unexpected twist or turn often displays God’s generous love and mercy. The parable doesn’t follow the behavioral code of most humans, such as the old adage that there are consequences for one’s actions. Our idea of mercy is justice; God’s idea of mercy is compassion. To give from our excess is justice; to give from our need is mercy. Here I would like to discuss briefly, parables in general, for example their genre, the different levels of reading the parables, the issues expressed within them, and what they say to us today. Then I will look more closely at the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the issues expressed within it. Are the issues the same or different today?

Parables are from an ancient oral tradition. Our goal like the goal of the form critic is to “reach back and understand history the way Israel saw it, which was far different from our modern scientific outlook. To simply read the bible all on one level as though no changes had taken place in biblical thought over the centuries is to miss the living spirit of Israel’s growing faith.”¹ We may have experienced a similar oral tradition when we heard old family stories shared around the table, or singing church hymns or singing jingles when we jumped rope. Along with these, wisdom was passed from one generation to the next through the parables, stories passed on values and morals of a society or culture. Parables are stories compressed in time, which communicated an important message about the reign of God expressed in terms of common human experiences; such as sheep and shepherding; lost coins; farming, seed and fertile ground; rich man/poor man; or the oppressor/the oppressed. The New American Bible, in the

¹ Lawrence Boadt, Reading the Old Testament An Introduction (New York, N.Y. Paulist Press. 1984), 85.

section on bible dictionary, defines a parable, as: “In Hebrew, *mashal*, which signifies both a significant short story and an enigma. It is a case of a comparison taken from the realities of daily life to express the mystery of the reign of God.”² It is not important to remember the details of the story, though the story form makes it easier to remember. What is important is to learn the lesson that Jesus taught. Crossan’s definition of a parable is: “A parable tells a story which, on its surface level, is absolutely possible or even factual within the normalcy of life.”³ This definition conforms well with the definition given above.

However, Crossan in his book, In Parables The Challenge Of The Historical Jesus, argues that we need to be specific about what form of figurative speech Jesus is using. Crossan states that the genre of parable “includes almost any type of figurative language from the short riddle to the long and fully developed allegory.”⁴ In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we will argue that Jesus is using the figurative language of a fully developed allegory. Some argue that it is not an allegory, as stated by Wilfrid J Harrington, O.P. in Parables Told by Jesus: “The power of the parable derives from its economy of words, its finesse, and its lack of allegory and idealization. It remains on the human-temporal level, yet all of it points to the nature of God: “I have sinned against God and against you.”⁵

Later, Crossan states that “An allegory has many separate but connected points of reference and each detail is important in itself, but the parable has only one major point and all the details serve only to build up this single reference.”⁶ He writes this to argue the position of Adolf

²Members of the Catholic Biblical Association of America, New American Bible St. Joseph Edition (New York, N.Y., Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1970), 340.

³ John Dominic Crossan, In Parables , The Challenge Of The Historical Jesus (New York, NY. Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973) 15.

⁴Ibid. 7.

⁵ Wilfrid J Harrington, O.P., Parables Told by Jesus a Contemporary Approach (Alba House, New York, N.Y. 1974), 125.

⁶ John Dominic Crossan, In Parables The Challenge Of The Historical Jesus (New York, NY. Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), 9.

Julicher, who claimed “that Jesus” stories were not allegories with many separate but connected references but were parables with one main point incarnating some very general religious and ethical truth.”⁷

Crossan goes on to categorize the parables into three categories; parables of Advent, parables of reversal and parables of action. We will focus on the parables of reversal, which is where Crossan classifies the parable of the Prodigal Son, along with the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Pharisee and the Publican, the Wedding Guest, and the Proper Guest. Crossan describes Jesus’ parables of reversal as polar: “a reversal of world as such. When the North Pole becomes the South Pole, and the south the north, a world is reversed and overturned and we find ourselves standing firmly on utter uncertainty. The parables of reversal intend to do precisely this to our security because such is the advent of the Kingdom.”⁸ This is where we may experience the feelings of confusion or have an unnerving experience. The last part of this quote reminds one of the often heard statement, that security is only an illusion.

During our community retreat in June, 2003, Abbott John Klassen, OSB spoke of four blockers that affect how we read and understand parables. The first blocker, he says is ask the question, “Is the parable true?” Instead, he says to ask the question “What does the parable mean?” The second question opens our minds and imaginations to a variety of possibilities. The first question stifles our imagination, closing off the other possible ways of interpreting what the parable is saying to us. The second blocker is the idealization of the hero. We see the other character as one of lower status, dishonest, over cautious or lacking understanding of Christian values; the old routine of the good and the bad. Our tendency is to see only the good in the character of the hero and only bad in the character of the villain. A third way of shutting down

⁷ John Dominic Crossan, In Parables The Challenge Of The Historical Jesus (New York, NY. Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), 8.

⁸ Ibid. 55.

our imaginations is to think that the parables were originally spoken, verbal language that conveyed the cultural, social, religious symbols, values and customs of the community. In order for them to remember the parable, they had to use their visual imaginations and the parables had to be short. With today's high tech and detailed information highway in movies, television, plays, books, newspapers and computers, we are less inclined to use our visual imaginations. Everything is portrayed or interpreted for us down to the smallest detail by the actors, directors or editors. The fourth major blocker to the parables is the view, "oh I've heard this one before," or when we skip over the parts we don't understand or that don't make sense to us. An example of the fourth blocker is the parable in Matthew 21:33-44, the parable of the owner who built a vineyard with a wine press and tower and grew a hedge around it. When he sent his servant to collect his portion, the tenants killed the servant. I always wanted the parable to end at verse 41 where Jesus asks, "What will he do to those tenants? They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons'" (RSV Matt 21: 40-41). Jesus goes on to explain the meaning of the parable as the kingdom of God being taken away from those who think they will enter it some day and the kingdom of God being given to another nation. If we listen to the end we would learn that our behavior must be different from the Pharisees and chief priests. We are to live our lives according to the example of Jesus Christ.

Now let us turn our attention to the Parable of the Prodigal Son (RSV Luke 15:1-22). This part of the pericope starts with the Pharisees and scribes criticizing Jesus for receiving sinners and eating with them. This parable of the prodigal son follows two other parables about lost items. The first parable is about the lost sheep in Luke 15:3; and the second is about the lost coin in Luke 15:8. The lines expressing the common idea of the parables are: "Just so I tell you there

will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance“(RSV Luke 15:7), and “Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (RSV Luke 15:10). Some see these three parables as three parts of one parable.⁹ And the first two parts of this parable help to set up the expectations of the readers or the audience hearing the third part of the parable about the prodigal son.

Some have argued that the title of this parable should be The Two Lost Sons, or The Waiting Father.¹⁰ The argument is that both the sons were lost, the elder as well as the younger. Those that want the title to be about the father say that the story is really about the father’s love, mercy and forgiveness. According to them, the father is the main character, not the sons.

It would be helpful, also, to define the term prodigal used in the title because it also describes the character of the father as well as the younger son. “Prod-i-gal adj. 1. spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant. 2. having or giving some thing on a lavish scale. n. a person who spends money in a recklessly extravagant way. *(also prodigal son or daughter) a person who leaves home and behaves in such a way, but later makes a repentant return.”¹¹ The second definition describes the father’s lavish love and forgiveness towards his son and the first definition applies to the younger son.

The translation I will be using is from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.’ And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son’ treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had

⁹ Kenneth Bailey, “The Pursuing Father”. *Christianity Today*. (October 26, 1998): 34

¹⁰Wendy Murray Zoba., “The Missing Mother”, *Christianity Today*. (October 26, 1998): 79 and Arthur P Boers., “Prodigal Love”, *The Christian Ministry*. (July-August 1994): 26.

¹¹ *The Oxford American College Dictionary*, (2002), s.v. “prodigal”.

compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf! And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'" (RSV Luke 15:11-32)

If we made a list of the characters, we could distinguish them as main characters and minor characters. Some characters are even assumed or not mentioned explicitly. The main characters of this parable would include the father, the elder son, and the younger son. The minor characters would be the owner of the pigs, the loose companions, the servants, and the neighbors. The characters not mentioned explicitly would include the narrator, the community, and the mother. Here I will concentrate on the major characters and the role of the narrator.

We will begin our discussion with the role of the narrator. Whether the story is written or oral, the role of the narrator is very important because the narrator sets the stage and the ambience of the story. A skillful narrator gets the reader or audience involved in the story. The audience, on hearing the parable, has a multitude of feelings, feelings of sadness, sorrow, anger, outrage, righteousness, gratitude, and humility. The narrator creates a certain effect where the audience develops certain expectations even in the midst of the ambiguity of the parable. The narrator is the one who reveals information to some, (i.e. those on the inside) and not to others, (those left on the outside). Sometimes the audience or reader knows things that the main characters do not know. He also omits some information, creating gaps in

which the reader or audience fill in with their own deductions and assumptions. This is one of the main areas where this parable is interpreted in different ways. For example, some interpret the younger son as being genuinely sorrowful, repentant, and seeking reconciliation with his father, family and community. Others think that the younger son is playing the father for a fool. They consider the younger son to be selfish, calculating, demanding and rejecting his family, community and religion. The younger son is trying to improve his lot in life and, knowing his father's love, he tries to gain his forgiveness and to regain membership in the community through his father's influence.

Another technique of the narrator is to repeat certain motifs. These motifs can be repeated in a pericope, a chapter within a book, a book of the bible or from different parts of the bible, such as from the Old Testament and again in the New Testament. Repeated motifs stress important plots and themes in the parable. We get to know the characters through these repeated actions and interactions with other characters and their role with the themes in the parable. The New Jerome Biblical Commentary describes this parable well when it says: "it has four emphases: (1) The motifs of universality, community, and soteriology are inextricably commingled. (2) Conversion is a requisite for finding joy. (3) Happiness consists essentially in a willingness to share in God's own joy in dispensing salvation. (4) The call to participate in God's love and joy is issued through Jesus Christ."¹² In this quote we see the three aspects of forgiveness: repentance (conversion-a turning to God), reconciliation (accepting God's love), and restitution (participate in God's love and joy). Restitution is the one aspect of forgiveness that is not mentioned in any great detail, though we can fill that gap with the attitude and expectation of the elder son and the community.

¹² Edited by Raymond E. Brown, S.S. et al, The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, NJ. Prentice Hall. 1990), 707.

Now let us turn our attention to the character of the father. We meet the character of the father in the first verse; it is a general statement that tells us he has two sons. The father is portrayed as breaking with tradition and breaking the law in the very second sentence of the story. The argument goes that the cultural response to the younger son asking for his share of the estate would be a beating and possible expulsion from the family. Megan McKenna, in her book on the parables, states that this request of the younger son was unthinkable: “This younger son tells his father he wants him dead and turns to a life of licentious, irresponsible behavior.”¹³ This is an example of filling in a gap. At this point we are not told anything about the father, his feelings, his thoughts, or his reaction. The third sentence tells us the father does the unthinkable, dividing his property and giving the younger son a share of the property, the inheritance that by law belongs to the whole family and the elder son in particular. According to Megan McKenna, “At the time of Jesus the worst thing Jews could do was give up their religion and take with them part of the communal inheritance, the promise of faithfulness, the land of the people.”¹⁴ “...according to Jewish law, the father gave away the elder son’s inheritance, breaking the law. The elder son was to inherit it all and then decide how to divide it.”¹⁵ Kenneth Bailey also says: “Transferring the inheritance is a serious matter that should only be dealt with by the father as he approaches death.”¹⁶

The next counter cultural behavior of the father is in verse 20 where he sees his prodigal son, runs out to greet him, embraces the son and kisses him. Here are two unexpected behaviors of the father for those times. The first behavior would seem most unlikely for a man of considerable wealth to be seen running. (Though we are not explicitly told that he is

¹³ Megan McKenna, Parables (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994.), 135.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 135.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 133.

¹⁶ Kenneth Bailey, “The Pursuing Father”, Christianity Today, Vol 42 No 12, (October 26, 1998): 35.

a rich man, we can fill in the gap, being that he owned flocks of sheep, herds of cattle, house servants and slaves.) The behaviors of embracing and kissing would seem to be describing more of a maternal response to the son than a paternal response. The narrator tells us the father had compassion for the son. Again this is an unexpected twist: the father receiving his lost son, treating him with love, kindness and forgiveness. Our expectations would be for the son to be punished and rejected by the father. We expect the father to be angry, hurt and unforgiving, since the son had rejected him, his religion and his heritage. The father shows his son unconditional love even before the son has a chance to utter his confession that he had been practicing repeatedly.

Again the father acts against tradition when he leaves the banquet to talk with the elder son. He tries to entice him, invite him and persuade him to come join the celebration. The father's actions have caused discord between the two brothers. There are hurt feelings, anger, confusion and unbelief about the circumstances of the celebration. The father is struggling to keep the relationship between him and his two sons intact. The elder son is unable to accept the father's love or to forgive his younger brother.

Now let us look more closely at the character of the elder son. He is the one most often ignored in art work depicting this parable. Although some may consider him a minor character, I think he plays a major role in this story. An interesting characteristic of this parable (and others) is that the characters are not named. This makes it convenient for us, so that we can put our names in any one of the characters mentioned in the story. We may identify more strongly with one character than another but we can probably see some characteristics of each character in ourselves. Henry Nouwen, in his book, The Return of The Prodigal Son, he looks at the parable through the eyes of each character. The elder son

plays the role of the self righteous, ever obedient and hard working team player. He works for the good of the family and community. He doesn't ask for extras, such as kid goat, to celebrate with his friends.

Again we are told nothing in the beginning about the elder son's response to the younger son's request of the father. We don't even know where the elder son is at the time or how he finds this information out. These are all gaps that we fill in.

In verse 29 we get an inkling of how the elder son feels after all has been said and done. Here the elder son expressed his anger over how the father greets his son, the younger son. The elder brother doesn't even claim him as his brother; he refers to him as 'this son of yours'. The elder son claims the prodigal son has devoured the father's money with harlots. How does he know that? Is he trying to make the situation worse or trying to make the prodigal son look worse by saying this about him? The elder son tells his father how faithful and loyal he has been and the father has never noticed his hard work, has never rewarded him for his loyalty.

The father responds to the elder son:

"And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'" (RSV Luke 15:11-32)

Note that here the father refers to the younger son as 'this brother of yours' trying to keep the relationship intact. To fill in some more gaps, I would say that, the father is trying to hold his family together. He wants his sons to be together, working side by side for the common good of the family. He wants his elder son to join in the celebration for the lost has been found. The elder brother doesn't want anything to do with this celebration. He is not willing

to forgive his father or brother. He wants the younger son to be punished according to the law.

We are told in verse 29 that the elder son expresses dismay with the father's behavior toward the younger son. Perhaps without realizing it, the father has lost both his sons: the younger son to a strange and different life in a foreign land, and the elder son to anger and isolation over the father dividing up the inheritance.

Here we must fill in some more gaps left by the narrator. We are not told that the elder son has even seen his brother since he returned. The elder son assumes that he has come home empty handed. He assumes he has squandered the family's money on harlots. In his anger, he attacks the father and the younger son. As stated above the elder son thinks he has done everything right. The father is not treating the sons as the elder son thinks he should, according to tradition and the letter of the law. We can perceive the elder son's anger by his refusal to forgive and join in the celebration. He further isolates himself from those who love him. His presence there and his refusal to join the family would be considered a great embarrassment to the father and family. Though we are never told how the story ends, we are left with the elder son remaining alone, on the outside, isolated from the celebration and the family.

Now let us look more closely at the character of the younger son. Some thoughts that may be going through his mind are: "I am the younger son. I will never make anything of myself here." He wants to go out and prove himself to his father, brother, his family and himself. In Greco Roman times this was normal behavior for younger sons. The spark that caused the blazing fire is his request for "his" inheritance, his share of his father's estate. As mentioned earlier, this request was a great insult to the father. It was as if he was saying he

didn't have time to wait for the father to die so the father should give him the property now. Another huge insult is when he sells the property for cold cash. By this behavior he is rejecting his father, the family, the community, and his religion. Some would describe this son as selfish, demanding, spoiled, rebellious and unappreciative. Yet, this young man had a desire to show all of them that he could make it on his own. His plans were to succeed, not fail. His youthful inexperience led him down the path to trouble. He did not look to the future, but lived in the present moment for the pleasures that could be had at that time.

When times got rough, when the distractions of the frivolous life were gone, he had lots of time to reflect on what he had done and to remember how good he had had it at home. At this moment of experiencing need, some might say he had a conversion experience. He realized what had happened and wished to turn back to his former life and made a decision to do just that. We are not told explicitly that he repented. We can fill that gap in two ways. Either he repented and made the changes or he did not repent and took a chance on his father's generosity and love. He knew that if or when he went home, he had to face up to his mistakes. He was not going to ask to be accepted back as a son but as a hired hand. He knew that his action of selling his inheritance and rejecting his family and their way of life was hurtful and embarrassing to his father and family. Also, the two parts of the parable before this one, the lost sheep and coin, address repentance, thus setting the stage for our expectation of repentance and reconciliation in this part of the parable about the lost son.

Yet, others might say he was playing his father for a fool. They think of him as selfish, demanding and spoiled. His speech was cold and calculating. He rehearsed it over and over again in order to convince his father that he had changed and to let him back into the family.

A major difference between the younger son and the elder son is that the younger son was able to receive, and accept the father's love and forgiveness. The elderly son was not able or refused to forgive his younger brother and father. He also refused to accept the love and forgiveness of the father, at least up to the end of the story as we know it.

Now let us turn our attention to the meaning of this parable on the different levels. The literal, the metaphorical, the analogical and the allegorical levels are very closely related. Some do not make a distinction between the metaphorical, analogical and allegorical. These levels are about: 1. what the human author meant to convey to the reader (the literal level); 2. what we as the reader get out of the reading (exegesis) and this can be metaphorical, analogical or allegorical levels. On the literal level this parable is completely possible in that it could have happened just as it is told. It is about an ordinary, everyday occurrence that was a common human experience. Let us start by defining the terms. Literal is defined as "1. taking words in their usual or most basic sense without metaphor or allegory: ...2. representing the exact words of the original text."¹⁷ A popular practice is to analyze the Old Testament prophetic announcements and symbolism as being fulfilled in the New Testament.

Symbols and symbolism is an important feature to discuss. A definition of symbol is "Symbol (Gr 'something thrown together'). Something perceptible representing naturally (e.g. lion symbolizing courage) or conventionally things present, symbols enter our imagination, affect our feelings, and influence our behavior. Rational explanations will always fall short of the potential range of meanings expressed by given symbols. Particularly when we take up religious symbols, which represent ultimate, transcendent realities, we can expect these symbols to prove inexhaustible in their significance. The relationship between

¹⁷The Oxford American College Dictionary (2002), s.v. "symbol."

symbols and signs is much disputed. Many hold symbols to be particular kinds of signs. All symbols are signs, but not all signs are symbols; for example a traffic sign is not normally reckoned to be a symbol.”¹⁸

In the parable of the prodigal son, verses 22-23 are filled with symbols. First the father tells the servant to get the best robe to place over his son. The robe is a symbol of wealth, royalty and lets the son, as well as the community, know that he belongs; he is a member of the group. The ring is a symbol of authority. The father often passed the ring on to the eldest son as a sign of passing the authority on to the next generation. Megan McKenna writes about this parable: “Some exegetes even say that the ring means he got it all. In effect he was made the first son, the elder, by the father’s actions.”¹⁹ The shoes for the feet were a symbol of the son being a free man; he was not a slave in bare feet any longer. The fatted calf and the feast of celebration is a symbol of great rejoicing. Meat was only served on very special occasions. The father was celebrating having his lost son back in the fold. We will also address the symbolism of the banquet later on when we discuss the other levels.

Many teachers have used the tool of metaphor to help their students understand a lesson. Jesus used this tool also, along with the common everyday occurrences that the people could recognize, identify and understand. A metaphor is defined as “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable, a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, esp. something abstract.”²⁰ The father’s embrace of the younger son was a metaphor of action which symbolizes God’s forgiveness, love and acceptance of sinners. The father is a symbol for God and Jesus Christ.

¹⁸Gerald O’Collins, S.J., & Edward G Farrugian, S. J. A Concise Dictionary of Theology. Revised and Expanded Edition. (New York, New York), 255.

¹⁹ Megan McKenna. Parables The Arrows of God .(Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis Books. 1994), 136.

²⁰The Oxford American College Dictionary (2002), s.v. “metaphor.”

The father is the good shepherd going out to the lost sheep, his son. The banquet is ordered by the father who has found his lost son. He receives his son with peace. Kenneth Bailey asks the questions, “Is the banquet in honor of the Prodigal or in honor of the father?” Is it a celebration of the Prodigal’s successful efforts at reaching home (on his own), or is it rather a celebration of the success of the father’s costly efforts at creating shalom?”²¹ Could it not be for both reasons? The banquet is to celebrate the reconciliation of the son to the father, the father’s way of granting forgiveness, participating in the reconciliation and creating peace and the whole community joins in the celebration. The banquet is a metaphor for the Eucharistic banquet.

An allegory is defined as “(GR. ‘speaking under the guise of something else’) a point-by-point interpretation that goes beyond what a narrative says on the surface to find deeper and further links with reality.”²² Crossan writes, “Allegory transforms the phenomenon into an abstract concept, the concept into an image, but in such a way that the concept can still be expressed and beheld in the image in a clearly circumscribed and complete form.”²³ On this level we go deeper in our exegesis of the parable, deeper than the surface interpretation of the literal level. On the allegorical level, the father is our loving, generous, forgiving, and merciful God. The elder son represents the self righteous Pharisees and scribes, the church authorities who stick to the letter of the law instead of the spirit of the law. They operate according to these laws and organize and expect appropriate behavior related to these rules. Like the elder son the Pharisees and scribes are not willing to accept God’s generous love,

²¹ Kenneth Bailey, “The Pursuing Father”, *Christianity Today*, Vol 42 No 12, (October 26, 1998): 40.

²² Gerald O’Collins, S.J., & Edward G Farrugian, S. J. *A Concise Dictionary of Theology. Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York, New York), 5.

²³ John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables The Challenge Of The Historical Jesus*. (New York, NY. Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), 9.

mercy and forgiveness. They remain separate from the celebration; they stand outside of the community, refusing to join in the banquet. The younger son represents the Gentile nation that will inherit the Kingdom of God because it is open to receive God's mercy, forgiveness and love. So the elder son like the Pharisees and scribes is dead and lost since he refuses to go in and join the community. The prodigal son is associated with the sinners mentioned in the beginning of chapter 15. Jesus receives sinners and tax collectors and dines with them. So the tax collectors and sinners are the lost sheep. So, like Jesus, who dines with sinners and tax collectors, the father of prodigal son also dines with the a sinner, a lost sheep that has returned to the fold.

We have mentioned that the banquet is a symbol for the Eucharistic banquet. On the level of an allegory we would compare the banquet to the Kingdom of God, where all are welcome to join in the feasting. Crossan says, "The central aspect of the teaching of Jesus was that concerning the Kingdom of God...Jesus appeared as one who proclaimed the Kingdom; all else in his message and ministry serves a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it."²⁴ The banquet is a symbol of the Kingdom of God and the peace that is a part of that Kingdom. Some Christians believe that the Kingdom of God is right here on earth. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and he lives among us. A theme of the Kingdom of God is the first shall be last and the last shall be first, a part of the reversal that we spoke of earlier. The elder son was first and the younger last, but as the story progresses the younger son becomes first (with the ring) and the elder son become last (remaining outside). Likewise the Pharisees and scribes were first and the gentiles considered second, but then the gentiles become the chosen nation and the Pharisees and

²⁴ John Dominic Crossan, In Parables The Challenge Of The Historical Jesus (New York, NY. Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), 23.

scribes are considered second. A theme for the banquet is that the invited are not present and the uninvited are present. The elder son was invited but refused to come to the banquet. Likewise, Pharisees were offered the Kingdom of God but they did not accept the teachings of Jesus.

What are we to learn from this parable today? Is it the same lesson of old? What lesson does Jesus want us to incorporate into our lives? This parable tells us about God's love, compassion and forgiveness toward us. It is the same lesson of old. It tells us how we should live in relationship with God, God's creation, and one another. It tells us about the Kingdom of God. "The entire story is one of grace, grace undeserved, unexpected, unearned. It Jerome's words, "grace, which is not a payment due to merit, but has been granted as a gift."²⁵

We are to receive the gift of God's generous love that is unearned. It is shown through the gifts of mercy and forgiveness. We are to love one another as God loves us. Thus we need to give the gifts we receive to those around us. God's love is so much greater than our love for one another. This all reflects the communal aspect of our lives. We do not live alone. We are all a part of community.

The character of the father demonstrates God's great love for us by his immediate loving embrace of his prodigal son. He does not judge the son; he does not make any demands of repentance or restitution of the son. He is thankful for the lost being found, the dead coming back to life. The father extends this love to the elder son, also. He leaves the banquet to extend a personal, heartfelt invitation to him. The elder son is too caught up in the martyr role. He has done everything right and he wants to be rewarded. He wants the rules he has

²⁵ Christopher A. Hall. "Rejecting the Prodigal", . Christianity Today Vol 42 No. 12. (October 26, 1998): 73.

lived by to produce some benefits. He is not interested in peace and harmony in the family or the community. He refuses to accept the father's gifts of love, compassion and forgiveness. He refuses to give forgiveness and peace to his younger brother. The younger son, representing the Gentile nation, is able to receive the father's love, mercy and compassion. We too, need to learn to give and receive forgiveness with no strings attached. Like Nouwen, we must become the father. We must set the example of forgiveness, love and peace. We must extend forgiveness, accept those lost, and work to create peace and harmony in our families and communities.

In today's society, we have so many areas where we need to work for peace, forgiveness and reconciliation. In the recent past there has been the fighting in Bosnia, Africa, Israel, Palestine and Central and South America which continues today. The area of corporate injustices such as the actions by Enron and Arthur Anderson is another issue in need of forgiveness: which demands repentance, reconciliation and restitution. Today we continue the war against terrorism all over the world but particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq. There have been people working for peace for generations. Peace is a slow, gradual process. Peace is created by taking little steps at a time. Individuals can create peace in their local areas. This can spread to a larger area and soon systemic change begins. One need only recall the specific, momentous moments in our history, like tearing down of the Berlin Wall.

In the movie "Pay It Forward," a young boy tries to change the lives of the people around him for the better. It starts out as a class assignment. He reaches out to a street person, his mother and his friends. He started a chain reaction of random acts of kindness across the United States of America. His idea was that when someone did something nice for you, a random act of kindness, you had to pass it on to three other people. The last scene of the

movie shows all of the people touched by this young boy's idea, gathering in his front yard. In the beginning he thought he had failed because things weren't working out the way that he had expected them to resolve. This brings to mind that change is not always in our time but according to God's time.

This quote from Tutu's book, No Future Without Forgiveness, written after the fall of apartheid in Africa, sums up the communal aspect of forgiveness while addressing the inner attitude of the individual. "*Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, '*Yu, u nobuntu*'; 'Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*.' Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life. We say, 'A person is a person through other persons.' It is not, 'I think therefore I am.' It says rather: 'I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.' A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.'" ²⁶

²⁶ Tutu, Desmond Mpilo. No Future Without Forgiveness (Doubleday New York London Toronto, Sydney Auckland 1999), 31.

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