

The Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32

Year C Proper 19
(Catholic); Year C Proper
19 (Revised); Year C Lent 4

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3
▲	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	▲	▲	▲
■	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲	▲	▲
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples		▲	
▲	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room		▲	
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)		▲	
●	Mary Magdalene - a 'fallen woman' who became the first female disciple, the humblest member of the group due to her shame about her past		●	
▲	Phillip - one of the youngest disciples, always well-meaning and honestly curious, sometimes lacking in confidence			▲
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts			▲
●	Jesus			●
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus			▲

Scene 1

Judas , Matthew

{Matthew greets Judas, who is returning from a preaching engagement of Jesus'}

Matthew Welcome back. How are things going?

Judas They went very well. We wrapped up early and the others are right behind me. We had an enormous crowd, and they ate up every word.

Matthew So he's back to being more friendly to the crowd?

Judas Yes, he was very teacherly and conventional. He preached an old chestnut: the parable of the prodigal son.

Matthew The what?

Judas You know! The parable of the prodigal son. I'm sure you've heard it many times. This is probably the tenth time he's used it.

Matthew The *prodigal* son?

Judas A young man asks for his inheritance early and goes off and squanders it, so he has to come begging back to his father.

Matthew Oh, that one! Is that what the rabbi calls it? The *prodigal* son?

Judas No, I don't think I've ever heard him give it a title. That's just how *I* think of it.

Matthew Why on earth do you call it *that*? You do know what "prodigal" means, don't you?

Judas Of course I do! It means wasteful, profligate. The younger son blows his entire inheritance!

Matthew That's a...strange way of thinking about the story.

Judas Why? What do you call it?

Matthew How about the parable of the *repentant* son? That's what it's really about, isn't it? That the son sees the error of his ways and returns to his father.

Judas [*arguing good-naturedly*] He only returns because he has no other options. He has to take a job feeding pigs - and they eat better than he does! He figures life as a servant in his father's household will be better than life in the pig sty. Which he wouldn't be stuck in if he hadn't blown his inheritance!

Matthew [*arguing good-naturedly*] You think the rabbi is trying to teach people how to manage their money? This is a spiritual lesson about the need for repentance!

Judas So *you* say.

Matthew So *everybody* would say!

Judas If you're so sure about that, how about a bet? We go ask everybody what their title for the parable is, and if more of them agree with yours, I'll do your chores for the next week. If more agree with me, you'll do mine.

Matthew Agreed! It'll be the soundest investment I ever made!

Scene 2

James , John , Judas , Mary , Matthew , Peter

{Judas and Matthew find a group of the others to try their bet out on.}

Judas Do you remember the parable where the younger son asks for his inheritance early and then goes and squanders it and has to return home?

Matthew *[correcting what he feels is Judas' biased summary]* Repents and decides to return home.

John Of course. And the father takes him back and won't think of reducing him to the level of a servant.

Peter But the older brother gets all bent out of shape over it.

Matthew Right. Has anybody ever heard what the rabbi calls this parable?

everybody *[everybody ad-libs various forms of "No"]*

Judas Good! Now our question for you is: what do *you* call the parable to yourself when you think about it?

James Why do you ask?

Matthew We have a be- . . . big disagreement about what the best title for the parable should be.

John Okay. I call it the parable of the forgiving father.

Matthew You think the parable's really about the father and not the son?

John Well, it's not surprising that a younger son would want his inheritance early, and it's not surprising that an older brother might get upset over it. And it's not surprising that the younger brother would then run through all the money and have to return home. The surprise is how the father treats him when he does.

Judas *[to himself]* No help there. *[to everybody]* Okay, who's next? How about you, Mary?

Mary *[a little shyly]* Me? *[after a pause]* My answer's close to John's, except I think more about the son. I'd call it the parable of the forgiven son. *[to John, a little more boldly]* The really surprising thing is to *be* forgiven.

Matthew That's very close to my answer, too.

Judas *[whispering to Matthew]* Not close enough! *[to Peter]* All right, you're up.

Peter The parable of the jealous brother.

Matthew What? You mean the older brother?

Peter Yup. He's my favorite part of the story. The guy is such a loser it's comical!

James Stop right there. That's ridiculous! The older brother was right to be mad.

Peter The older brother deserved everything that came to him. Or didn't come to him.

Judas So if you were in his place, you would have acted differently?

Peter I absolutely would have acted differently. I wouldn't have had to feel jealous over my little brother stealing away the fatted calf, because I would have gotten it for myself long before!

John *[suddenly realizing that Peter's position is a little more unusual than everybody's been thinking]* Hold on. You're saying the older brother was a loser not because he was unforgiving, but because he was...too timid?

Peter That's exactly it! He wanted to get his inheritance and party just like his younger brother - you can tell by what he says to his father - but he chickened out. *That's* why he was so mad at the end!

James *[sarcastically]* So the moral of the parable is that you shouldn't be afraid...to ruin your life?

Peter The moral is: you shouldn't be afraid.

Judas *[breezily]* Okay, moving fearlessly on...James.

James I'm going to defend the older brother. It takes courage to follow the rules, and it's wrong when you don't get rewarded for that. So I'm going to call it the parable of the wronged brother.

Matthew You think the father should have turned the younger brother into a servant like he wanted?

James No, no! I get the idea of forgiveness and everything. It's fine that he didn't disown him. But to throw a party for him? And to kill the fatted calf that by rights should have been the older brother's? *[in full rant mode now]* And how about leaving him completely out of the loop about what's happening? He comes in from a hard day's work in the field - harder than any day his brother ever put in with the pigs, I can guarantee you! and by the way, I guess the father didn't think to send a messenger to tell the him he could knock off work for the day - so he comes in after a long day and suddenly there are all these party preparations going on. Well, who's he going to assume the party's for? Who else is there? So he naturally gets his hopes up and then - bang! - he sees little brother sitting in the seat of honor. It's not to be borne!

Judas *[after a pause]* Uh, okay, thanks everybody.

{The others exit, leaving Judas and Matthew alone again.}

Matthew A zero-zero tie.

Judas I sure didn't see *that* coming.

Matthew Perhaps we could do *each other's* chores this week.

Judas Maybe, but I was beginning to really look forward to not having *any*. Let's wait for the others to return and take some more votes.

Matthew All right, but we don't count the rabbi's answer. The original bet was about how any ordinary listener would think of the parable, not what its real title is.

Judas Agreed.

Scene 3

Jesus , Joanna , Judas , Matthew , Phillip , Thomas

{Another group of disciples returns along with Jesus, and Judas explains the survey to them.}

Judas Everybody got it?

Phillip You want us to tell you what we think the name of the parable the rabbi told today should be.

Matthew That's right. What do you think it's mainly about? What's the lesson?

Thomas Why do you want to know? What's this about?

Judas We have different ideas about what the title might be, is all. And we want to find out what the rest of you think.

Jesus *[slyly]* I'd wager there's more to it than that.

Matthew *[a little rattled by Jesus guessing what's really going on]* We can't tell you any more because we want to hear your opinions unaffected by what we think. *[to Jesus]* That means you can't say anything until everyone's had a turn.

Jesus All right. Who wants to go first?

Phillip I will. I call it the parable of the younger brother.

Judas Um, okay, but what *about* the younger brother? I'll just give you an example from one of the others: the parable of the forgiven son. It emphasizes the fact that he was forgiven. What would you emphasize?

Phillip Just that. That he was a *younger* brother. I'm one, too, and I can totally identify with him. He wasn't greedy or impatient or rebellious. He did what he did because of all the pressures a younger brother has: always being overlooked, always having to take the hand-me-downs. And it was worse that he had this perfect older brother who always did his duty! Sometimes, you just have to escape and find your own life.

Joanna *[privately to Phillip]* Is that what you did, coming to join the rabbi?

Phillip Yeah! I guess it was!

Joanna We're glad you did.

Matthew Who's next?

Thomas Well, I'd focus on the younger brother, too, but the amazing thing to me is the risk he took returning to his family, even with his plan to just be their servant. Even though he obviously

wasn't expecting to be welcomed back as a son, he must on some level have trusted, or hoped, that he would at least be treated civilly. Because the real danger was that his family would just crush him for what he did. That would have been worse than twenty years of feeding the pigs. And in the meantime, his older brother had no faith at all. He worked himself to the bone trying to hold on to his father's approval, which he didn't need to do at all, and was ready to see himself losing it at the slightest sign! And so I call the younger brother...the Believing Son.

Judas And we're down to the final answer. Joanna?

Joanna I'm afraid I don't have a title for any one character in the story. I think of them all together as the Parable of The Men! Their behaviors are just so typical. To never want to grow up, to resent having to, to waste your living by taking no thought for tomorrow, to compete for an authority figure's favor, to make these grand gestures of contrition. If the characters were women, there wouldn't be a story at all! Or it would be completely different.

Phillip But what about the father? What was wrong with him?

Joanna I never said that everybody in the story had something wrong with him, only that they were all typically male. The father was one of the good ones.

Jesus *[to Judas and Matthew]* Well, are you satisfied with the answers you've received?

Matthew I suppose so.

Judas *[to Jesus]* I guess we can hear yours now. What's the parable really called?

Jesus Let's discuss it over dinner. I'm famished. And we can hear everybody else's answers, too.

Thomas I'm on cooking duty tonight along with Peter. I'll go find him and we'll get right on it.

Judas *[a sudden impulse]* Hold on. Matthew and I were talking earlier, and we decided we want to do everybody's chores for them this week. *[to Matthew]* Isn't that right?

Matthew *[initially surprised]* Huh? Uh, yes. *[suddenly liking the idea]* Yes! An excellent idea. I mean: yes, that's what we decided.

Phillip Wow, thanks!

everybody *[everybody else ad libs thanks as well]*

Judas Well, it's the least we can do for such a diverse and unpredictable crew!

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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