

“Finishing The Story”
Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32
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In his book *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* Robert Fulghum says that whenever he told a story to his children when they were small and added the customary fairy tale ending, “And they lived happily ever after,” one would always ask, “And THEN what happened (p. 145)?” How could he tell them Cinderella discovered she was married to a guy with a foot fetish and glass slippers hurt like you-know-what? How could he tell them the frog who was kissed by the princess might have turned into a prince, but still had the personality of a frog and ate flies for breakfast? In short, how could he tell them the truth about what happens next after the fairy tale ends and real life begins?

Children have a way of cutting to the chase, of directly naming the question or reality everyone else is thinking about, but no one is stating. A story may seem to have a fairy tale ending, but things rarely work this way in real life. Some books or films may wrap up everything neatly with a bow, but real-life endings tend to be more complicated. The good news is biblical stories are in synch with real life. They offer insight into the human condition and guidance regarding faith, but they do not always wrap up everything neatly, even when it may appear that they do.

Consider our reading from Luke 15. It may seem like everything is resolved because the son who has lost his way returns home and is embraced by his father. Selfishness leads to a betrayal of self and family, but when he hits rock bottom, he comes to himself and decides to return home and confess his wrongdoing. But before he can get through the well-rehearsed lines, his father runs to him, inappropriately for a man of his age and status, embraces him with arms of love, and throws a party to celebrate his return. All is well, cue music, right?

No so fast! The older brother is not exactly thrilled that his no-count younger brother has returned home, much less that he has been

welcomed back so quickly, without any hesitation. And then, a party is thrown in his honor? No one killed a fatted calf for him! He is irritated with his brother, and not for the first time, but he is furious with his father for whom he has shown loyalty all his life, only to see him dote on this no-count prodigal, pig feeder!

The father pleads with him to join the party, assuring him that he is loved too, but he refuses. The story ends with him standing outside with his arms folded, still refusing to join the celebration. The younger son may be reconciled to the father, but now the older son is alienated.

Yet we don't know that this is the end. This is just a story, told by Jesus in response to the Pharisees' and scribes' criticisms that he is spending too much time with sinners. But it is a story that is intended to reflect real-life issues, and if we think of these characters in this way and imagine what might come next, which the text itself seems to invite us to do, there are numerous possibilities. The older brother may never reconcile with his father or brother. We have known people who have become entrenched in anger and alienation. But he may come around, there may be a sequel to this story that moves everyone to tears. We just don't know how things end for the older brother.

But then, do we really know how things end for the younger brother? The story seems to end with him returning home with humble confession and being embraced in love by his father. But is the end? We know the type. These no-counts may return for a time, they may seem to get their act together, but it's always temporary. People don't change. Give it time. He'll fall back on his old ways. We don't know how this part of the story ends either.

The only thing we know is that the father — who represents Jesus and ultimately God — will be there waiting to embrace both sons in love, no matter what. We normally refer to this story as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but both sons are prodigal. In fact, the father, that is, God, may be the most prodigal of all. The word has taken on strictly negative connotations. A prodigal spends money recklessly. But to be prodigal also means simply to give something on a lavish scale. How else could we think of God's love in this story, in our lives, or in general, other than as lavish, reckless even.

That's how the Pharisees and scribes view Jesus' practice of hanging out with sinners. It is reckless! "It certainly is," Jesus says through this parable, "No argument here, this is what I am called to do, this is how God loves each and every one of us!"

So, what we have in this parable is a clear assurance of God's love without any certainty of how the main characters respond to this love over time. We are invited to use our imagination and finish the story.

But we are not just invited to imagine how the text plays out, what its next chapter might be, should Netflix decide to renew it. We are invited to finish the story in our lives. With whom do we identify in this story and how will our part of the narrative end?

Some of us, perhaps all of us at some time, identify with the younger brother. We may or may not think of ourselves as being rebellious. We're independent thinkers, free spirits, soaring birds that need to fly free, all of which is fine in and of itself. But when our free flying leads to a free fall, when our independence leads to isolation and emptiness, we need to come to ourselves and return home.

For those who have grown up in the church, this kind of prodigal wandering often involves time away from the church. Once we go off to college and no one is checking on us, we find other ways to spend our time. Not having grown up in the church, my form of rebellion in adolescence was to go to church, and oddly enough, that distanced me from my father and family, while it brought me closer to God.

For others, this rebellion takes the form of moving away from a family tradition in work or relationships or a way of life. An older member in my previous setting left college after his first year at Davidson to join a big band. He had an exciting year, but decided after that year to return home and go back to school.

For still others, the prodigal movement is more ominous, involving addictions or cults. Many of us have had family members get caught up in one kind of self-destructive lifestyle or another. Some of us have had this challenge. But it doesn't matter how we wander away from all that is good, including our own best selves. All that matters is that we come to ourselves and return home.

Others identify with the older brother. We are the typical first-borns. We like to follow the rules and for others to as well. Ian was like this when he was young. Whether he was in a classroom at school, singing in a choir at church, or playing a team sport, he wanted to know who was in charge and what the rules were so that he could follow them. And it drove him crazy when other children didn't follow the rules!

I can't imagine where he got this perspective from... but I know it is not an unmixed blessing. Our irritation with others can grow into judgment, and if we develop feelings of resentment, like the older brother in Jesus' parable, we may need to ask why we have been following the rules, even what we believe to be God's rules, in the first place. If we are doing so with gratitude and in response to love, there shouldn't be any resentment or need for judgment. If there is, we have wandered off course and need to find our way home.

No matter which brother we identify with, how will our story end? Nothing is fixed. The future is open-ended. This is the case with our dreaming process as a church... and this is the case in our lives. The only thing that is certain is God's welcoming love. Sherlock Holmes once said to his colleague, "Good old Watson! You are the one fixed point in a changing age." God's love is the one fixed reality for us.

We might imagine God waiting patiently like the father in Jesus' parable. We might imagine Rembrandt's portrayal of that story, with the father reaching out to embrace the son who kneels in humility before him. We might think of our own grandmother embracing us after some difficult journey. Or we might think of Forrest Gump, ever ready to welcome Jenny home, no matter where she has been, no matter how long she has been away. Forrest does this because he knows Jenny's struggles. Her father was an abusive alcoholic. But he also does this because he loves Jenny, no matter what. Such is God's love for us. Knowing that makes it easier to imagine how we might finish the story.

There are so many stories of alienation — in families, among friends, with God. There seem to be so few stories of reconciliation. That doesn't have to be the case. We have a standing invitation to return home to God's love. What will we do? How will we finish the story?