

“Focusing on the Central Character”

Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

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Good stories involve a mixture of an interesting plot, rich character development, and various overarching themes. They cannot be reduced to *a* point, though people often ask, “What is the point here?” The point of a story is often the story; to the extent that stories have major themes, there is often more than one of these; and they are inevitably tied to different characters in the story.

Consider the story Jesus tells today about a man with two sons. We know it well and are drawn to the tension between the two brothers. Why not? They are central to the story, and they reflect our experience. Any story that begins, “There was a man who had two sons,” is going to get our attention. There is going to be conflict, intrigue, and pathos. Think Cain and Abel or Joseph and Esau!

It’s a common family narrative that made sense long before systems theory and family therapy. Human beings are social creatures and familial beings, we need each other to be whole, but we also struggle to relate to each other. The story reflects these joys and tensions, and we benefit from considering them as we examine our lives.

But the brothers are not the only characters in this story, and thus their experience does not contain all the wisdom found in it. There is another character, the most important character, the father who represents God. How do we know this divine parent is central? By paying attention to the context Luke provides.

This parable is not a story Jesus tells without provocation, leaving us to guess at his intent in telling it. Luke tells us that tax collectors and sinners come to listen to Jesus, and some Pharisees and scribes grumble, saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Some religious leaders, not all but some, criticize Jesus for welcoming all the wrong people into his presence. “Why does he do this?” they wonder, “How could a man who claims to speak for God behave in this fashion?”

Instead of visiting faithful church members, he's out gallivanting around with politicians and drug dealers.”

It is a criticism of Jesus and his understanding of God. What kind of rabbi is he to operate this way, and what kind of God does he think he represents? Well, he tells them, or to be more precise, he shows them through three parables about lost things — a sheep, a coin, and a son, well, two sons. Our parable presents the most detailed and moving imagery, but the message is the same throughout. The God Jesus represents makes a special effort to embrace the very people others think are worthless because this God extends love to all. Thus, Jesus extends love to all as well.

There is an added twist in our parable, a little shot taken at his critics. They are like the older son who resents the father's kindness to the younger son. These particular religious leaders resent Jesus' kindness to sinners. But as the father in the parable wants to embrace his resentful older son too, Jesus loves these resentful religious leaders. God extends love to all.

I realize that we may feel like this is low-hanging fruit. Of course, God extends love to all, this is what the gospel is all about! Aren't we just elucidating the obvious? If only we were...

One challenge is that many people grow up with a very different image of God, one like the God depicted in Jonathan Edwards' eighteenth-century sermon “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God” which contains images of people burning in a fiery hell. When images like this get hammered into us as children, it is difficult to remove all traces of their impact, even if we come to reject them intellectually.

I don't know how many people I have worked with over the years who have struggled with toxic guilt and shame connected to images of an angry God who is out to get them. Sometimes the guilt and shame come simply from embracing a different image of God, but they can also be related to identity or behavior, career paths or other life choices. Many end up in therapy because of such ideation. It's why religion has to be avoided for a time in some therapeutic processes. Bad religion is a toxin that is difficult to remove entirely.

I have often compared this to something Dana's father used to do to her mother. Dan, who turned 94 this week, he says because he has been living near the foot of the cross... has always had strange dreams, really strange. Years ago, some of these involved Dana's mother, and if she behaved poorly in his dream, he would wake up and treat her with some emotional distance until she asked what was bothering him. He would reply, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Of course, she hadn't done anything, it was just a dream, but like many of us, he would wonder why he had this dream. Was there something behind it? In this case, no, there was not, but most of us have had this feeling, the emotional residue of some experience that won't go away long after we have dismissed any legitimate concern about the experience. So it goes with images of an angry God.

But it's not just childhood memories that plague us. There are strident voices in our culture, many of them religious, who are trying to resurrect Jonathan Edwards' God, often for political purposes, and to have an angry God in our faith, we need an angry Jesus. Documenting these views is part of the work Kristen Kobes du Mez has done, what she shared with us this weekend. We may think we can or should dismiss this material, but we need to know what is being claimed about God and Christ because it affects our witness in the world.

In his book *You, The Warrior Leader* 2004 Southern Baptist Convention president Bobby Welch quotes SBC megachurch pastor Jerry Vines who said, "The church is not a passive milquetoast organization... it is militant, aggressive, victorious!" The language is literal, not spiritual, and Welch builds on it, saying the current struggle between good and evil will not be won by "parlor games in board rooms," holy hugs, or singing "Kum Ba Yah." Jesus the Warrior Leader will lead the assault on "Satan's terrorists," which, by the way, includes some of us. Along with Jesus, Welch looks to Robert E. Lee and KKK Grand Wizard Nathan Bedford Forrest as models of warrior leadership (referenced in *Jesus and John Wayne*, Kristen Kobes du Mez, p. 212)."

In like manner, in his 2015 book *Jesus Was an Airborne Ranger: Find your Purpose Following the Warrior Christ* Army chaplain John McDougall says a number of things I won't quote from a pulpit, but he

says he wants to put aside the pretty-boy Sunday-school Jesus no man can relate to, his savior is no Mister Rogers. Jesus is a bad-*something*, a forceful man who vigorously advances his kingdom, a wild-at-heart ranger on a mission, and you can't spell *Ranger* with *anger*, he says (quoted in *Jesus and John Wayne*, p. 247). It is a different view of Jesus and God which calls for a different kind of discipleship.

But the biblical view is clear. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, not an airborne ranger. He says blessed are the meek and the peacemakers, and he calls us to love our enemies and forgive those who harm us. God is the loving father who welcomes home the prodigal and still wants to embrace the resentful zealot. Some may argue that we need something more in the real world to combat certain enemies, fine, but leave Jesus and God out of it!

Our hymn of discipleship today is familiar. We are accustomed to singing about the wideness of God's mercy and the kindness of God's justice, the love of God that is broader than the measure of our mind. But we have printed the hymn today because the third stanza is not in our hymnal. "But we make His love too narrow by false limits of our own; and we magnify His strictness with a zeal He will not own." God will not *own* images that do not fit God's character and Christ's.

In the parable from Luke, Jesus answers his critics' questions about who he is and what kind of God he represents. He is about finding those on the margins of society so that all are embraced in love, and God is the One who sends him on this mission because God's love is for all. More than anything else, this story is about the character of God which we are called to represent and defend whenever it is distorted or maligned. But there is another takeaway from this part of the story. If this is who God is, there are implications for how we are called to live.

An angry God or Jesus might call disciples to acts of hatred and vengeance. A Warrior God or Jesus might call disciples to wipe out all who disagree with us or don't share our beliefs. A God or Christ who embraces prodigals calls us to acts of kindness and love, reconciliation and peace. Is this weak and milquetoast? In the eyes of some, perhaps, but through the lens of the cross, it is the epitome of true strength.

There may be occasions where military forces clash when the defeat of an enemy is necessary, but even that is a kind of failure. For God's desire is for peace and reconciliation, in so far as it depends on us, according to Romans 12:18. One son is reconciled to his father in Jesus' parable while God wants the other son to make peace with him and his brother. In the reading from 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul says that in Christ, God reconciles the world to God and then calls us to a ministry of reconciliation. The greatest strength is found not in wiping out our enemy — personal, political, religious, or military — but in finding a way to resolve our differences and live in peace. This is God's desire, and we are called to participate in it.

In his book *God has a Dream* Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it this way (pp. 19-20).

I have a dream, God says. Please help me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony, are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family.

That is God's dream, and God calls us to help bring it to life.