

The tale of the Hobbit by J. R. R. Tolkien is one of the stories that was read to me by my father and older sister when I was a child. The main character of the story, Bilbo Baggins, is a conservative hobbit that takes great care in making decisions about the things that he is about to do. Hobbits are small in stature with large, hairy feet. They also have very interesting customs, one of which is how they celebrate their birthdays.

When a hobbit has a birthday, he or she puts on a great feast and invites friends and family to the celebration. Rather than receive gifts, the birthday hobbit has presents for everyone who attends the party. Some of the food that Tolkien wrote about that was served at such parties included tea and buttered scones, seed-cakes, raspberry- and apple- tarts, and cold chicken and pickles. To us this might not sound like an appealing way to celebrate one's special day. However, when one considers it from a different perspective, one realizes that hobbits actually receive several gifts and attend many parties throughout the year.

Hobbits, although they are fictional characters that inhabit Tolkien's Middle-Earth, may have a better understanding of the abundance in the parable which has become known as the Prodigal Son. This story may have caught its initial audience off guard because of their understanding of the culture in the ancient Near-East. The people who were coming to listen to Jesus included tax collectors and sinners. It irritated the Pharisees and the Scribes, who were also going to listen to Jesus

speak, that the new influential teacher allowed sinners to even be within hearing distance. The Temple authorities wondered if Jesus had forgotten that keeping company with people of this sort would defile him and make him ritually impure.

Jesus knew that his message needed to be heard by everyone in the crowd, and so he told them the story of a very prosperous landowner who had two sons. Upon his death, the rich man's land would be inherited by his sons according to their tradition: the elder son would get 2/3 of the property and the younger would receive 1/3 of it. However, this cheeky young fellow, in demanding his share of the inheritance, was essentially telling his dad to drop dead. The father reacted by giving his son what he wanted, rather than reprimanding him for his rudeness. The second born again breaches cultural norms by selling the land. This sale would have been offensive to both his family and to the neighbors because the sale was a religious infraction. The land on which the Jews lived was considered to be a gift from God. One does not sell such an inheritance, but rather keeps it in the family.

Another departure from what a halachic or devout Jew who follows the Law would do, is that after outrageous spending on drinking and as the King James version of the Bible says, "riotous living", the younger son ploughs through all his money. He is far from home in a foreign country where the Gentiles keep pigs. A famine plagues that country. In order to keep from starving to death, the wayward son

hires himself out as a swineherd. According to Moses, pigs were not kosher, and so in working with those animals the second son once again defied religious norms.

Hunger pangs and a growling stomach began to gnaw at him, and so the prodigal decided that a healthy serving of humble pie would be more appetizing than the pods with which he fed the pigs. The young man recalled the manner in which his father treated his servants. He then began to rehearse the lines he would use to beg, grovel, and smarm so that he might be his dad's employee.

Jesus continues to astound his audience with his telling of the tale by informing them of the scandalous reaction of the father when he sees his second son in the distance. The Lord tells the listeners that the man ran to meet his child who had been lost. Running as an adult was just not done! It was hard enough for the people to understand that this chap who should have been shunned and told never to darken the family's doorstep was being welcomed home in a grand, if not spectacular, way. The long-awaited return of this beloved son was over, and now the rejoicing could begin. The fattened calf was slaughtered and roasted or barbecued, and all sorts of scrumptious side dishes and other culinary delights would round out the meal.

The sounds of celebration and the aroma of various gustatory offerings hit the elder son hard as he approached the house. There was music and dancing and ululating

as servants passed trays of tantalizing dishes that would please even the pickiest eater. His brat of a baby brother was wearing fine robes, a shiny new ring, and the party had been thrown in his honor. What the...? The first born was livid: he had been respectful of his father, and labored hand-in-hand with the with the servants as they tended the crops and animals. This is now the point at which the father again breaks with tradition: he leaves his guests to go out to speak with his older son, encouraging him to be gracious and love his brother who has returned.

The father and his two sons have been presented to us in this biblical narrative, and theologian Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest, wrote a book about the three characters titled “The Return of the Prodigal Son”. In this publication, Nouwen inquires of the reader with which of the characters in the story does one most identify. If one has ever felt lost or rebelled against one’s parents, perhaps one feels akin to the younger son. Was it a body piercing or did you elope with your beloved? The next question the author asked is how was the rebellion resolved?

Nouwen then invites the reader to consider the lostness of both the sons. The sense of the older son being lost is harder to identify. He had been dutiful, obedient and he worked hard. When he witnesses his father rejoicing because of his younger brother’s return, pride, unkind thoughts, and selfishness come to the surface. He, too, needs to be sought out by God, the Good Shepherd, who won’t give up until both sons are safe and reconciled with the Father and one another.

We might also consider that the One who acts as a true older brother to both the Pharisees and the tax collectors, to all sinners and to the gentiles who were outside the Covenant, is Jesus Christ. He left his throne in glory to come and dwell among us. He even gave up his life, so that we could be brought back home to live with God. Let us not cling to our old tried and true ways of doing things; people in the church are sometimes seen as the older brother because of the harsh criticism of their lifestyle and other choices that they make. We should be rejoicing with God when people who have fallen short of God's grace, either by their action or inaction return to Kingdom living, because it is through God's gift of grace that we ourselves experience forgiveness.

Historically this story has focused on the prodigal son or on sinners who repent and come back to following the Law or the 10 Commandments. The real focus of the story is the father, who loves both his sons. God's radical, extravagant hospitality is not only to forgive or have compassion but also to give us a new life. God invites us to become like God by showing the same compassion for others. We are heirs of this abundant grace and as such God calls us to reflect our Heavenly Father in offering hospitality and compassionate care to everyone.

Beloved, you as a congregation often reflect the hospitality of our Father in Heaven when you furnish apartments for refugees who are being resettled in our area. The gracious giving of gift cards and financial support to the students of

Excel Academy and their families is yet another way that you show the Image of God to the world. How else might Georgetown Presbyterian Church engage in God's economy of abundance and extraordinary hospitality?

Considering the rejoicing at the feast, I am reminded of the music that was playing at the party. Had the celebration been held today, I would like to think that a song that late President George H. W. Bush and I both love would have made the playlist. The song might serve as a reminder to both sons in the parable about the gracious hospitality of their father. Country music star George Strait sang "A Love Without End, Amen," and the chorus shares the wisdom that a dad passes on to his own child in this way:

"Let me tell you a secret, about a father's love.

A secret that my Daddy said was just between us.

He said, Daddies don't just love their children every now and then,

It's a love without end, Amen. It's a love without end, Amen."

Beloved, let remember that, whether our former identity was similar to that of the obedient older brother or to that of the rebellious younger son, our Father runs to welcome us home with arms wide open.

*The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.*

Amen.