

[PRODIGAL SCENE - As the players assemble]

[PRODIGAL SON] I’ve had it. My older brother is going to get the lion’s share of everything from my father when he dies. I can’t do anything to change my father’s mind - that’s the way things are, after all. The oldest son takes over for the father. So I asked my father for my share of my inheritance, now. I might as well enjoy life while I can, because, later, my life won’t be worth a thing. I’m done with this family. I’m getting out of here! [EXITS]

[FATHER] I am so sorry that my younger son wanted to leave. When he took his inheritance, it was like he was telling me that I was as good as dead in his heart! I understand how he feels. It’s hard to accept that love doesn’t always mean getting what you want. So, I gave it to him. I know that he will waste it. I know that he will make bad choices. But I can’t make his choices for him. Otherwise, it wouldn’t really be love, would it? I will love him, no matter what, and hope for his return. And as for his older brother, well...I will be patient with him, too. [EXIT]

[OLDER SON] Finally! He’s gone! It’s about time! All my younger brother ever did was complain about how unfair life was, always shouting about how our father didn’t love him. Well, is it my fault that I was born first? He needs to repent - he needs to stop being so resentful, and accept his place in the family. And yet...I have this funny feeling, you know, that our father might love him more than he loves me. I don’t get it. I do everything that I am supposed to do. After all, my father owes me, right? So I better make sure that I do everything right, so that I don’t lose my father’s favor. Why does my father love him so much? What have I ever done wrong? [EXIT]

[SERVANT] What a sad sight. Why did my master’s son leave the house? I am just a servant of this family, but I appreciate what I receive from this family. This youngest son had everything that he could have asked for, especially his father’s love. Oh, sure, his older brother was owed his father’s riches, but he seemed to get farther and farther away from his father’s love. The older one seemed to care more about being in charge than in being part of the family. His father saw how he looked down on his younger brother. He didn’t like that. But he is patient with them both, no matter what. What a good father! I am so glad to be a part of this household. I will pray for the best. [EXIT]

[BLANK] [PRAYER] A generous parent. Two spoiled children. One takes pride in being able to inherit the power in the family. The other is ashamed, and resentful, and leaves the family. The family servant looks on, sees what is happening, and is just glad to be a part of the household. The father, loving them all, tries to be patient, with them all. The father will wait, patiently, for the younger child to return. With an open heart, he is expected by the father.

The story from today’s reading in Luke’s gospel is one of the most famous parable stories of Jesus. It seems like a simple story. But like most of the parables of Jesus, its simplicity hides deeper truths, truths that seem to shift, depending on our point of view. Like our church family who played out the roles here, today, we can all find a different

angle on the story, depending on who we are, and how we are, when we read it, and reflect on how different roles in the story seem like how we look at our own lives, other people, or our God. Each time, we may see a new angle on God, ourselves, and others. Each time, we might be one person in the story, or many, or someone not in it.

And each time we hear it, and reflect on it, our lives are in a different place. [YOUNGER] Are we, like the youngest son, frustrated with what seems like the unfairness of life, and rejecting our family, and our God, as we get lost in the world of empty pleasures, and empty friendships, only to discover how much we need God’s mercy and love? [FATHER] Are we, like the father, like God, looking at the wanderings and the mistakes of our children, and trying to be patient with them, and generous with them, even when they reject us, and even when they take our love, and our faith, for granted? [ELDER] Are we like the elder son, having done things all of our life that we think should give us God’s favor, and our family’s favor, only to discover that grace is for broken people as much as it is for fortunate people - and, often, much more?

[SERVANT] Or, are we like the servant in this broken family, looking in on how two spoiled children fail to appreciate the generousness of a parent, who is not even their parent, watching over everyone as if we were his own family members? It was, after all, the memory of how well his father treated his servants that encouraged the youngest son to return to his father. It seems like the servant knows more about the father’s love, God’s love, than his children.

[PAINTING] Many years ago, the painter known as Rembrandt captured all of this, and more, in a famous painting of this parable of Jesus in Luke’s gospel. We see all of these characters in the painting, and we get to choose which one to focus on. If you look at the painting carefully, though, there’s a person that doesn’t seem to belong there.

[REMBRANDT] The person in the painting that doesn’t seem to belong is actually almost in the middle of it. It is a man, sitting, and looking carefully at the father embracing the younger son when he returns. He is not a servant. He is not a family member, it seems. Who is he? Well, if you look at other paintings by Rembrandt, it doesn’t take you long to figure out who it is. It’s Rembrandt. He painted himself into the middle of his own painting, reflecting on its characters the way that we do. It seems that Rembrandt realized that he had a choice, too, about who he would be in this parable.

[BLANK]

Who are we in the parable? We are whoever we need to be to come home to God. If you need to overcome your resentment for younger generations, you are expected, by God, who waits for them, and you, equally, like the most loving and patient of parents, letting you know, with everything that God does, that everyone deserves forgiveness, and dignity, and joyful celebration, when we come home to God. The way that we live our faith in the image of our loving God, as a household of God, sets the stage for the return of the prodigal children of faith.

If you feel that you ran away from God, and God’s family, and you’re afraid of coming home, you’re expected. God has been waiting since the beginning of time for you

to come home. Our birth, and our baptism, were moments of exceeding joy for God. Learn from God’s servants, as the younger son did. Taste just how bad things are away from your God’s home. And then, come home, to the God who loves you, who waits for you with open arms, and an open heart, ready to offer you far more than all you can ask or imagine, when you return with a humble and open heart.

If you feel that you’ve done everything that God has asked of you, but you still feel resentful, and angry, and unfulfilled, like the elder son, you’re expected. The God who loves you like one of his own children appreciates how hard you’ve worked, but God wants you to appreciate even more the love of God that money or work can never buy, love that bears fruit in this world even when we feel that we’ve failed. Failure to love is our only real failure.

If you feel that you serve God, and appreciate God, and love God, but are never worthy of being in God’s family for real, you’re expected. Your humility and your gratitude is loved by God, very deeply. It’s the model of what makes people who have wandered from God’s love have the confidence that God will accept them. God appreciates your service, but God is ready to offer you far more. Ask God to be adopted. You’re expected.

And if you’re like Rembrandt in that painting, looking in on this, but not really committing yourself to any of these relationships with our saving God, you’re expected. We can think about it, mull it over, as long as we want, but until you’re part of God’s extended family in your heart, you’re really not in the picture. Choose any of these roles to start your journey as part of the family of God. You’re expected, and wanted, and needed, as any of us are.

[PAINTING] It doesn’t really matter where you start in this picture of faith. What is important in the end, though, is that we are at home with God in our hearts. Come home to the God who has always expected us, ready to serve God as God’s children, and amazed by grace that makes us God’s children, grace from the God who loves us, who sets us free, in the safety of God’s loving arms. [RETURN] Come home. You’re expected. You’ll always be expected. Amen.