

# *"It's a River, Not a Pie"*

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Luke 15: The Prodigal Son  
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All Saints Episcopal Church, Chicago

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Gracious God,  
break open our hearts  
so that we may know  
the expansiveness of your love;  
in your Holy Name we pray. Amen.

Good morning!

*It's a river - not a pie.* It's a river - not a pie. I invite you to remember that.

Did you zone out when I started reading this morning's gospel? Heaven knows if I hadn't been reading it -I'm sure my mind would have gone somewhere for a while. It's not like we don't know how this particular story ends. The Prodigal Son - "Oh yeah." The story of the Prodigal Son is to Christianity what the Yankees are to the World Series. "Oh-hmmph-them again."

Yet, this story is the essence of Christianity.

Christianity. Not the Christianity that some would have us believe. It's not the narrow, moralistic, judgmental, provincial ideology that some purport it to be. It's not the constitutional amending, gay marriage-banning, if-you-love-another-adult-that-somehow-wrecks-who-I-love theology that some claim it to be.

The scriptural reality is that Christianity is first and foremost, not about keeping people out, it's not about sending people away, it's not about saying, "You can't play." Christianity in its finest form is an open door and a warm hearth. It is a gracious host meeting us at the door and saying, "I've waited so long to see you. I am so happy you're here. You know, I was hoping you'd stop by."

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Even though we know the Prodigal Son story, let's just list out the basic facts so that they're fresh in our minds.

- 1) Younger son blows off family responsibilities by rudely asking for his inheritance before his father is dead and skips town. Promising, in words each of us has probably, in one form or another, uttered under our breath, "That's it! I'm blowing this clam-bake and never coming back."
- 2) Younger son commits some very stimulating sins.
- 3) Younger son wakes up one morning, his head nestled next to a pig's tail, a hangover permanently etched in his brain.

- 4) Younger son through the fog remembers his life before all the fun, recalls that at least then he had food and his best friends weren't pink with hooves.
- 5) Blown-off father walks down to the end of his driveway every day, scanning the horizon for his lost one, praying for his return.
- 6) One day Blown-off father's prayers are answered. The lost one returns. Before the sinning son can even say how sorry he is, Dad has the whole house in an uproar getting a mid-morning, mid-week party all put together.
- 7) The Blown-off father is now the Dad overflowing with emotion, because all he knows is that his son has come home. His son is alive. He smells a bit, looks a bit haggard around the edge. But he's kicking, breathing, and he's alive.
- 8) Which of course brings us straight and unavoidably to the big brother: that overworked, fragile man; a man with whom I deeply identify. A man who knows right from wrong, good from bad, and most especially work from play. A man who is the good son. He comes back from the fields and what does he smell? Barbeque - tasty-savory-tangy beef barbeque - wafting through the air. Why is this he asks? Your brother has come back. He's come back and they killed the fatted calf? Your dad is overjoyed. But my brother's scum.

Your dad loves him. A party? What has Dad ever done for me? He gets the calf? And I get calluses. Here's a man kinesthetically and ontologically, a man who in his very sinews and bones believes that there is a limit to his father's love, that his father only has a limited amount of love. That somehow whatever the "loser" son gets will vastly diminish what, he, the deserving son will receive. "If you love him this much -and give him all these things -what in Heaven's name will be left for me?"

And I know, I know how the older brother feels. [I'm an oldest sister - believe me, it only makes the condition worse.] Have you ever had that experience? The experience of slowly realizing that you are quietly and not so subtly becoming very annoyed and maybe even angry that someone else who has screwed up big-time has just been forgiven. Forgiven and offered another chance - or in this case forgiven and then seemingly granted a party and a promotion. Have you ever wondered, Now why am I busting my rear end, when there are others who seem just to coast along on other people's graciousness? How is this fair? How fair is it?

Two thoughts.

The first. It's not fair. And we might do well to get down on our knees and say, "Thank you Jesus." It's not fair, and that's okay because we are constitutionally incapable of always being the big brother. I may identify with him. But that's only because it's easier for me to feel righteous then to remember all of the times that I like the younger brother have been in desperate need of unmerited, completely unwarranted forgiveness. It's not fair. And that's good news.

My second thought: *It's a river, not a pie!* God's love for us is not a 9-inch, deep-dish strawberry, rhubarb pie - as delectable as that might be. God's love for us is a raging, roaring, rain-forest fed, class five river of grace. It is an ever-flowing stream of abundant love. God's love for us is not limited. God's love is not finite. It is not a pie that is whacked up and given out parsimoniously to the deserving. God's love, God's welcome, God's grace is distributed recklessly washing over all in its path. God's love is a river-not a pie.

That was good news for the Prodigal Son. And it's even better news for us. Amen.