

A sermon preached by Deacon Tracie Middleton
at AED's Archdeacon & Deacon Directors' Conference
March 2017

The Prodigal Son

To start with, which of the characters in the story do you most identify with?

- Younger son?
- Older son?
- Father?
- How about the fatted calf?

We're often warned about the dangers of projection and transference - people projecting their own feelings onto us or transferring their feelings about other relationships onto us. But, it sort of seems like parables are actually designed with the intention that people hearing them *SHOULD* project their own experiences into the story. In reading a parable, projection seems like a productive way to interact with the story.

One thing I thought of when reading it this time was that it seemed both brothers might be worrying over the same question, which anyone can project their own story onto:

Who does the father love more?

This question shows up in lots of contexts:

Who does Mom love more?

Who does the teacher - or the coach - love more?

Who do the voters love more? the media?

In churches, the question often is - Who does the priest love more? And maybe especially among clergy - Who does the bishop love more?

(My own view of the history of the priesthood subsuming the diaconate after the church's population started to balloon after Constantine is that our conflict arose partly from this question.)

So the sons are caught in this painful, distressing question. Each one can tell that the father loves his brother, but somehow, neither one can see the way the father loves him, because it's not the same. They each seemed to think that because they can see that the father *loves* the other one, it means he loves the other one *more*, and they each get bitter about it and angry at the rest of the family.

- Maybe the younger son had decided that the father loved the boring brown-noser better, so since he couldn't win his father's love by being more of a suck-up, goody-two-shoes than his older brother, then he would go all out in the other direction and show everyone - and himself - that he didn't WANT the father's love anyway.
- Maybe the older son was upset when the father showered love on the screw-up, because then it was clear love wasn't awarded on merit, and this eliminated the only advantage he thought he had in winning the father's love over his brother. He'd spent all these years 'slaving' away, trying to rack up points - and now it was clear there wasn't a point system, so he had no chance since he wasn't "fun" like his brother.

"Who does the father love more?" is the wrong question. It will never lead to truth and will only cause pain and animosity. **What are some better questions?** (*I asked everyone's input on this during the sermon.*)

[I also talked about some of the ways that each of the characters in the story could reflect some aspect of the diaconate, and the way we could operate in relation to the church, in relation to those outside the church, in relation to colleagues.]

In what ways do deacons sometimes operate in the role of the father? In the role of the older son? the younger son?

(Here there was some discussion as well)

- **Father** - there are times, in our 'bridging' type of role, that the deacon is going back and forth between disconnected or disaffected groups, as the father did both in extravagantly welcoming the younger son and throwing the party and also in trying to get the older son to come in to join the celebration. For example, the older son/ church (who may be afraid that bringing in new people will displace their importance, or who may be aggravated about our trying to open the door and give access to people who 'don't deserve' or 'properly appreciate' it) and the younger son/ church exiles or outsiders (who may feel the church will reject them or that they are not 'holy enough' yet to be part of church or to have a leadership role, or who feel that they don't want or need whatever the church may be offering)
- **Younger son** - We're supposed to be the ones who go out into the world, which has different kinds of pitfalls than staying at home in the church as we may imagine the priests to be doing. It's easy sometimes to have sort of a self-righteous 'rebel' feeling about being a deacon and imagine that the church hierarchy rejects and snubs us, while the 'favored ones' in the priesthood get all the benefits, so we might kind of act like we don't need or want any of that and go a little wild to try and prove it.
- **Older son** - It can be possible to imagine that we as deacons are slaving away for free, doing all these things for the church, so the church should really realize how indebted it is to us and throw us a party now and then. We're part of 'holding down the fort' in the church while a lot of the culture has gone away to find meaning elsewhere. But it's also true that all the church has is ours - we can create a party any time we want, and maybe we should notice or create more reasons to celebrate. Maybe the culture (or the younger brother) won't think it has to leave to find celebration if the church itself became more willing to 'Rejoice and be glad now.'
- **Fatted calf** - We often are preparing ourselves so that, when the opportunity for celebration appears, we are ready and available - not only to set the table but to put ourselves on the table as an offering. Taken together with the reality of resurrection, this is not morbid self-destruction. It's more fully understanding Jesus' own experience of self-offering, and trusting that it leads to new life for everyone who joins the celebration.

The question of "**What merits celebration?**" is also interesting, because the older son could see evidence of the father's love in the fact that he was *celebrating* the younger son's return. I think the Puritan strains in our heritage lead us to both sons' assumption that only an achievement or success of some kind (something completed) is worthy of celebration. Under this assumption, a possibility or an idea or a beginning is not sufficient - and certainly just the fact of existence is not enough. But in the story, the father says they HAD to celebrate, because certain death had become the beginning of new life.

I think that's what deacons do when we proclaim the Exsultet - at the first flare-up of light, we announce that darkness is vanquished. I think that's part of who we are: going around outside the church, looking for new life just barely visible poking through the ground, and coming back to announce what we found as cause for immediate celebration. We can lay the table at a moment's notice for a feast to begin - anywhere.

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