

*The number of farms . . . has fallen . . . from more than 6 million in 1935 to roughly 2 million in 2012.*

The family farm was once the backbone of our national economy. But as one scholar attests: *the growth of urban areas means that healthy young people move out of agriculture, head to town, leaving behind the old, the sick and the dependent . . . This has resulted in the increased sophistication of agricultural markets which excludes traditional smallholders . . .* Which makes one wonder whether today's Parable of the Prodigal Son is out of date – because this younger son appears to be also fed up with living on his father's farm and wants to head for distant and more lively regions where he can live it up. Which reminds me of that old song about farm boys returning from military service after World War I that goes:

*How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm / After they've seen Patee' / How ya gonna keep 'em away from Broadway / Jazzin around and paintin' the town // How ya gonna keep 'em away from harm, that's a mystery / They'll never want to see a rake or plow / And who the deuce can parleyvous a cow? / How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm / After they've seen Patee'*

It seems odd too that Luke would ascribe to Jesus a parable in which the runaway son comes across as the wayward one when Jesus himself ran away at age twelve – finding the big city of Jerusalem more interesting than distant Nazareth and his family's carpenter shop. He is offended by his parents' reproach: *Don't you know that I must be about what's going on in this wider, scarier world?* And then there are those scenes where, having left Nazareth for good, Jesus is followed by his relatives who want to restrain him: *"he's losing his mind"*, drag him home or when they congregate at the back of a crowd, wanting to reason with him – and he says: *Mother, brothers? This crowd of people is my mother and brothers! These are my relatives.*

Indeed, scholars well versed in the Gospels say that the real target of today's parable is not the prodigal, wayward son – but the older brother, reflective of the Pharisees, who would indeed scorn the behavior of the younger brother and never welcome him home – whereas the prodigal son's father is so much more open hearted and open minded than that.

Which reminds me of another parable - about my younger son who drifted into unwholesome company, contradicted all the standards of dress, associations, music, shelter that I would impose. But ultimately it was his mother who saw in his very behavior (upon his early death) our own redemption from strict propriety – in a poem titled *A Hymn to My Son*:

*Perhaps dark, rough people need Angels of Light - / To soften them, untangle their hair, bring calm to their hands. / But we were already light, and bright, pressed and correct - / We needed - if to break open our courteous hearts - / An Unwashed Angel - uncombed and unshaven – grace / Streaming from the cry of electric strings, / Reaching out, shaking us in the night / From our too moderate dreams, / As he, single-eyed, lifting into his heart / Park dwellers, street saints, the hermits of the hotels, / Cried out, "See! See! These are my friends!" / Until we cracked open our eyes and, holding his sooted hands, / Followed him, weeping, into the Sorrow of God.*