

Prodigal: meaning Profuse, Lavish, Luxuriant, Lush, and Exuberant, giving out in great abundance.

It has been said that stories, narrative writings re-describe reality. Whereas straight talk “tells it like it is”, a novel, a parable, a poem raise reality toward a clearer vision of things from the depth of our imagination and from deeper still.

Regarding the parable of the prodigal son (more aptly titled the parable of *the prodigal father*) we have the frequent polarizations we find in stories, that of *youth versus age; a foolish youth versus a wiser elder brother; a sinner versus a Pharisee*. And as usual it's the younger, inexperienced character who demands “what's mine” to do with as he pleases, to live it up far from home, while the older brother keeps his nose to the grindstone - like a Pharisee who prides himself on his adherence to schedules and rules.

Both operate under the dominance of *the Law* – one to breach it and the other to stand righteously by it. Such is society as we know it, as displayed down through the ages. Split! Except in this story something that is *really* real is displayed.

The younger, rebellious son, having exhausted himself and his wherewithal in wild living – until he is living in a pigsty – realizes he needs to go home and admit his foolishness, his sinful ways and accept servitude as his destiny – become normal, subject to norms, to merited punishment [Tote dat barge! Lif' dat bale! Git a little drunk an' you land in jail].

Meanwhile the older son, the Pharisee, smiles his contempt for the juvenile character – refuses to trust his return, his conversion. Again, such is reality as we so often witness it. Until we break into the *reality* laid out for us in the behavior of the father.

He transcends both sons. He has always been looking toward the horizon – for his younger son's return. Seeing him a long way off, he runs to him, embraces him, kisses him. He brushes away all apologies of the younger son, dresses him up, convokes a banquet – expense is no matter – calls for music, dancing, reacts profusely, lavishly, luxuriantly, lushly, exuberantly “*because this son of mine was dead and he has come to life again.*”

And as regards his Pharisaical son – whose “virtuous” life seems to have made him only angry, unhappy, hypercritical? To him also! this father says: “*My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours . . . now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again. Join the party – enter the kingdom of God.*”

The difference? The father lives in a state of grace – universal grace. Beyond the usual reality of us versus them, sinners versus the righteous, the dominion of a Law splitting us into good guys and bad guys worthy of reward or damnation - - there is this other *really* real universe of mutual grace and a gracious God whose reign Jesus came to inaugurate. Will we ever get there? The fact that we can dream of it is our guarantee.

Geoff Wood