



Who is your favorite character in the parable of the Prodigal Son? Better yet, which of the three main participants in the story, the Father, the Prodigal Son, or the older brother is a role that you have played in your life or may even be starring in now? The great American author Ernest Hemingway has said this parable may be one of the greatest short stories ever written. I would say it is the most popular of the many parables that Jesus told. I think it reveals to us a very moving image of God, and quite a genuine reflection on human nature.

The story begins with a son who has it all and walks away, doing great harm to his family. I

suspect some of us may have had someone like that in our own lives. I thought of a man named Rudolf Hoss. Hoss was the Nazi commandant of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp for several years and admitted to killing more than two and half million people, most of them simply because they were Jewish. Raised a strict Catholic, he had even thought of being a priest, but eventually gave himself to the Nazi doctrines. Could this cruel and hateful man ever find God's mercy? During his trial, he confessed openly to all his crimes. From an historical source: *He was sentenced to death and he refused an appeal. As he waited the day of execution, he asked to see a priest. A Jesuit priest, a Fr. Lohn who spoke German, went to him. Hoss made a formal profession of Catholic faith, made his confession, received absolution and the next day received Holy Communion. It is said that after having done so, he fell to his knees sobbing.* God's love and mercy knows no bounds. His justice is beyond our comprehension. It is far easier for me to think about the Loving Father of the Parable welcoming home the Prodigal son than God forgiving this man. I do not think I can forgive him, but I do believe God can and did.

Here is another story of conversion: *Although raised in a conservative family opposed to abortion, Abbe Johnson began volunteering for Planned Parenthood after seeing their booth at a volunteer fair at her college. Johnson volunteered in 2001, and progressed to the position of community services director. Identifying as "extremely pro-choice," she worked at the Planned Parenthood clinic in [Bryan,](#)*

*Texas* for eight years, escorting women into the clinic from their cars and eventually working as director of the clinic. The Planned Parenthood clinic named Johnson employee of the year in 2008. A current movie named *Unplanned*, which probably will not get much press, tells the story of how Abby Johnson, upon seeing an abortion on ultrasound, had a transforming moment that led her to leave Planned Parenthood. Today, she is a very active pro-life woman who has converted to Catholicism.

What can we say about all the death and destruction that Abbe Johnson brought to so many innocent children? Can God forgive pedophile priests who have destroyed the lives of so many children and the bishops who covered it up? Can God forgive terrorists who randomly cause devastating pain and destruction that will last for generations? Can God forgive Adam Lanza who killed the children of Newtown, Connecticut? Are these people in Hell? Are they outside the mercy of God? This charming parable that makes us smile has a powerful shocking message that tells us that God's mercy is always available and limitless. Notice in the parable: the prodigal comes to his sense because he is hungry. It is not sorrow that first brings him to the welcoming arms of his Father and the celebratory dinner with the juicy fatted calf and joyful music. The Father embraces him in love before the boy can mention his sorrow.

I can identify with the older brother. He is not happy with his father's mercy. In painful indignation he cries, *I was the faithful one who stayed home and you celebrate this son of yours* (notice he cannot even call him my brother). *What about me?* Have you ever found yourself saying, *I am a good person. I go to Mass. I try to be good to people. I am better than those who do not practice their faith. My way is the right way of thinking and they are wrong and not worthy of any praise.* Do you find yourself resenting others because they were recognized for something and you were not?

Have you been tempted to be angry at someone for years for something that in the light of this parable would be trivial: *I was not invited to your son's wedding; you said something mean spirited about me years ago, I was a better son/daughter than were you; You never appreciated all that I have done for you.; God, you seem to give more blessings and favors to so many other people; why do these things happen to me; I don't deserve them.*

The Older Brother is a key figure in this parable and one that we often fail to notice. He is a sad figure. He describes his life all these years as: *I slaved for you.*

He does not know how much the Father loves him. He cannot be joyful at the return of a lost brother because he has not allowed himself to know the love of Father that surrounds him. He is a sad unhappy person.

The parable ends with the Father inviting him into the dinner. It does not tell us if he goes in. The Father is always inviting us into us. Come and rejoice, your brother was lost and now is found.