

Once upon a time, Moses was heading up the mountain to see God. He decided to take a different route through a small town he didn't visit often. As he passed the synagogue, he saw a Jew coming out. The Jew called to him, "Moses, is that you?" Moses nodded, yes. "Are you going up the mountain to see God?" "Yes," says Moses. "Could you do me a favor? Could you ask God if he ever thinks about me, and would you remember me to him?" "Sure," Moses said and off he went.

When he was almost through the town, someone else recognized Moses. This time, it was a bum leaning up against the wall of a building. The bum called out, "Moses, is that you?" Moses, looking askance at the bum, reluctantly says yes. "Are you going up the mountain to see God? Would you be willing to do me a favor? Could you ask God if he ever thinks about me, and would you remember me to him?" Moses grudgingly agrees and off he went.

Moses gets to the top of the mountain and listens to the words God gives him to bring to his people. As he was about to leave, Moses remembered the two men. "Oh, God," Moses says, "I met this Jew coming out of synagogue and he wants to be remembered to you. He also wants to know if you ever think about him." God answered, "Oh, yes, tell him I see him often and think of him often and have reserved one of the best seats in the Kingdom of God for him."

"Ok," Moses says. "There was another guy, a bum leaning against a wall, who also asked to be remembered to you and wondered if you ever think about him." "Oh, yes," God said, "tell him I think of him often, though I don't see too much of him, and that I have a seat reserved for him in one of the lowest parts of hell." "Ok," Moses said, and off he went down the mountain.

As he passed through the town on his way home, he saw the bum, still leaning against the same wall. The bum wanted to know whether Moses had asked God about him. "Yes, I did, and he said to tell you that he thinks of you often and knows you well--but he doesn't see you too often and that he has a seat reserved for you in one of the lowest areas of hell." Much to Moses' surprise, the bum threw his arms around Moses and danced up and down for joy, "God remembers me, God thinks of me and knows me. Moses, you have made my day, in fact, you've made my whole life!" Moses walked away while the man was still dancing deliriously. Moses shook his head, wondering about the man.

Then Moses ran into the good Jew coming out of synagogue again. The Jew ran up to Moses wondering whether Moses had talked to God about him. "Yes, I did, and he said to tell you that he thinks of you often, sees a good deal of you and knows you well and that he has reserved for you a seat in one of the highest areas of heaven." The man was elated. He threw his arms around Moses, and jumped and down he was so delighted. "Oh, Moses, you've made my day, you've made my whole life. All this prayer I've been doing has meaning, and God is true and wonderful. Thank you." And Moses went on his way.

Several years went by and Moses again was on his way to the mountain to see God. As he passed through the small town, he found out that both the bum and the good Jew had died. He made a mental note to ask God how they were doing. After he and God finished talking, Moses asked whether God remembered the two men. "Yes," God replied, "the bum leaning against the wall is sitting next to me in the kingdom of heaven, and the good Jew coming out of the synagogue is sitting in one of the lower rims of hell." Moses was stunned and horrified. He thought to himself, God lied to me. God, knowing all, said to him, "Moses, I am God, and I don't lie. "No, Moses, I said they had reserved places in heaven and hell, respectively." "I, I don't understand," Moses said.

"Moses, when you told the bum that I knew him, what did he do?" "Oh, he acted strangely, dancing up and down with joy. I thought he was crazy." "But Moses," God said, he was rejoicing that I, God, thought of him, remembered him, who is nothing, and that day he began to climb into the kingdom of heaven." "But the other man, the good Jew reacted the same way, dancing up and down and singing your praises," Moses said. "No, Moses," said God, "he was delighted and relieved not that I remembered him but that all his praying and worship in synagogue was having an effect on me. That day, he started sliding into hell."

"Oh," said Moses, thinking. And he turned to go back down the mountain. As he did, God called out to him, "Moses, just because you spend a lot of time with me doesn't mean you know me at all." And Moses descended the mountain wondering for the first time in his life whether he was going to end up in heaven or hell." (Megan McKenna, *Parables: The Arrows of God*, 128-130).

"This story," theologian Megan McKenna writes, "shatters any thoughts that we can earn our way into heaven, or that we deserve it. It says to obviously religious people: be careful. Don't think that just because you go to Sunday services and because you're doing "all the right things" that your place in heaven is assured. Perhaps the bum against the wall is truer in his heart than the one person in church. The bum knows he needs God, that God is God. He's amazed that God even thinks of him, let alone keeps him in mind."

In today's gospel story, known to us as the "Return of the Prodigal Son," the elder son certainly believed he could earn his way. He had done what was expected of him, he worked hard, did what he was supposed to do. Because of that, he expected a reward.

Many of us are familiar with the story of the prodigal son and rightly view it as a story of the Father's, God's, incredible love and forgiveness. God the Father who keeps after us, ready to welcome sinners back at the first sign of repentance. But there are lots of layers to the parable. Perhaps there's more that God wants us to see. After all, as McKenna reminds us, "all of Jesus' parables call us to radical, drastic changes in our lives." (*Parables*, 139).

We can see the drastic change the younger son makes in his life. This son had turned away from his Father, asking for his inheritance. That act brought deep shame to this Jewish family; it was like saying to his father, I want you dead.

The younger then squandered the inheritance on drinking and loose women. With no money left, he became so desperate that he hired himself out as a field hand. He was sent to feed the pigs. This was unthinkable for a Jew who was to have nothing to do with pigs. It only brought the son more shame and desperation.

Finally, he realized that what he has done was wrong. He comes to his senses and makes a drastic change. He returned home and sought forgiveness. "Father", he said, "I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Yet his Father welcomed him home with open arms and a loving, forgiving heart. Perhaps, like the bum leaning against the wall, the younger son was able to rejoice that his Father still thought of him, remembered him, he who was nothing.

Obviously, this son had been lost. He was lost to the love of God. His soul was on life support waiting for someone to pull the plug. Then, he took the risk of repenting, of amending his ways, of changing his way of being in the world.

But what about the elder son? The son who followed the rules. He was respected by his family and friends. People admired him, praised him even, for all he was doing. Outwardly, he was the model son. Yet he was lost and didn't even know it. He was lost in resentment and bitterness. His heart had turned to ice. He could no longer experience the love of his Father. Resentment and bitterness do that—they turn us away from the sunlight of the Spirit.

The elder son was in desperate need of love and had no idea how to receive—or give it. He saw the love his father showed for his younger brother. Jealousy and self-pity boiled to the surface. He refused to join the party his father had organized. In anger, he tells his father, "all these years I've been working like a slave for you, and I've never disobeyed your command." What are you doing, throwing a party for "this son of yours" who shamed you in front of all your friends? Who used up his inheritance with prostitutes? Are you crazy?

Yes, the love of God is crazy, isn't it? But it's a love that we have to open ourselves up to. God does not force his love on us. He gives us free will. He allows us to make choices. He waits for us constantly, as the younger son's father did, going out to the fields to await his son's return. That crazy love of God, when it sees a hint of us wanting to turn away from sin, runs towards us, as the younger son's father did. That crazy love of God, that lavishly welcomes us repentant sinners back into the fold, engulfing us in his arms. Oh, what a crazy God we have. We, who are nothing, we are thought of by this God; we, who are nothing, we are remembered every moment of our lives by this God who leads us, guides us, follows us everywhere.

Part of me feels sorry for the elder son. His pride had taken over his life. Any humility he might once have had is gone. What will he do, the elder son? What will you do when you find yourself in a situation where you're filled with self-pity and jealousy? Perhaps when a co-worker gets the promotion you applied for. Or when a friend forgets to include you in the group she pulled together to go on an outing. Or when your close neighbor ignores you?

We don't know what the elder son ultimately does. Like any brilliant parable, this one ends by leaving open any number of possibilities. I hope that the elder son comes to his senses, too. I hope that, with God's grace, he seeks forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a wonderful—and often difficult--thing. It allows us to be freed from the bondage of our resentments and anger. Yet it requires that we accept the fact the people are human and make mistakes. It means that we understand, really understand, that no one is perfect. Not even us. We all make mistakes.

When we hold on to anger and resentment against others, we let them live rent-free in our heads. When we release anger and resentment, our icy hearts melt, and we are once again able to experience the sunlight of the Father's love.

I pray this day that, like the bum leaning against the wall, we are able to know the Father's love. I pray that we are able to jump up and down and dance deliriously over the simple fact that God thinks of us, remembers us, and knows us, we who are nothing. I pray that that, in our humility, we are able to see, truly see, that we need God. Amen.

In Jesus' time, theologian N.T. Wright points out, for a Jew to ask for his inheritance while his father was still alive was unheard of; it was tantamount to saying to his father, "I wish you were dead." (N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 187). This would have brought incredible shame to the family. Yet the father went ahead and divided the property between the two sons. The younger son would have had to turn his share into cash, selling off his share to someone else. (N.T. Wright, 187). This would have brought added shame to the family. But the father did not seek recrimination against his son. (N.T. Wright, 187). Maybe some of you or someone you know can identify with the younger son. Perhaps you or someone you know didn't end up in a life of debauchery – but did turn your back on family and on God. Maybe you've experienced the redemptive love of the Father. You know what that is like.

"For a Jew to have anything to do with pigs was bad enough; for him to be feeding them and hungry enough to share their food, is worse." (N.T. Wright, 187).

I hope, that with God's grace, he lets his icy heart melt. I hope, with God's grace, he finds the love he so desperately needs and wants.