

I’ve begun to look at parables from an entirely economic point of view. The sower diversifying his investment in different fields to maximize his return. The ultimate outsider Samaritan whose good-neighbor-policy toward the man who had fallen among thieves, is a gesture of enlightened self-interest, building bridges like the Chinese buying US Treasury Bonds, may someday make him an insider. The unjust steward who when his Ponzi scheme begins to unravel uses his master’s credit to bail out his biggest accounts, thus delaying the reckoning. The landowner who gives health care to everyone who needs it without reference to whether they deserve it or can afford it, or to whether they have a pre-existing condition.

The parables all seem somehow to be about God’s prodigality at cross purposes with our human sense of parsimony. Especially, regarding the one we call the parable of the Prodigal Son we read this morning, I think this is true. For some people such playfulness with the words of scripture is blasphemous, for others it makes us a little uncomfortable, suggesting as it must that the correct meaning of such a snippet of the Word of God is not somehow set for us to discover, but rather malleable for us to stretch and knead into a slightly unfamiliar shape.

We know, if we know the parable at all—and I fear the time is coming and already is when a preacher cannot assume in a congregation any knowledge whatsoever of even this the most popular of parables—then we know that it is about God’s grace to a young man who repents and returns home after squandering his inheritance. Right? So we know at least that it can be said to be about investing an inheritance. In fact, it can be said to be about two different approaches to investing an inheritance.

One son asks the father to pull his share of the farm out in the form of cash so he can take it to an off shore country and invest it in a get rich quick scheme. As a type, this brash young son is very familiar to biblical readers. He’s reminiscent of Joseph who tells his older brothers that he saw in a dream these same brothers and his mother and father bowing down to him. Of course, his dream was true and after several reversals of fortune, he rose until he was second only in wealth and prominence to the Pharaoh of Egypt himself, just so God’s plan could be accomplished and he could save his family from annihilation in a terrible famine. Or Jacob himself, who after negotiating his older brother out of his birth right, ran off to a far country to save himself from fratricide, and there became a wealthy man with flocks and herds and wives and slaves. And when he returned he was honored with the name Israel, “he who wrestles with God” after facing and reconciling with his brother. So there is a great lineage of the kind of investing that this younger son in the parable was going to do, perhaps.

The tradition believes the assessment of the older son who when he returns condemns the younger son’s strategy when to the father he calls it “devouring your living with prostitutes.” But the story-teller says literally something more like: “he scattered the substance with abandon.” And isn’t that really what the Sower does in that parable, scatter his substance, his seed, promiscuously. I wonder if there isn’t something here in this older brother’s judgmental dismissal that doesn’t really envy the younger brother’s freedom and bravado, imagining what dissolute living might be like, and silently hating his brother for going and getting it. During the

halcyon “bubble” days, it seemed like everybody was pulling equity out of their house and imitating the leverage bankers. I heard of one man past retirement who took 3/4 of the appreciated value of his property and invested it in the market. When the famine came, he lost the house, and his retirement. But the older son’s strategy was a conservative one, the mirror image of his brother’s. He stayed on the farm and took care of the father.

Brothers are always locked in this kind of symmetrical conflict in great literature. So the younger brother comes back, and the older brother is away, out in the field. I imagine some of you are part of a pair of brothers or a pair of sisters. Which one are you? Did you go into the far country? Did you stay home? Have you been thought of as bad, or good by others in your family because of it? The way the Christian tradition reads this parable, no doubt following Luke’s frame story, the younger son is a stand-in for the “tax collectors and sinners” who eat with Jesus expressing their repentance; and the older brother is a stand-in for the scribes and the pharisees, who stand by and whisper about how Jesus couldn’t be a prophet otherwise he’d know these were bad people. So for Luke apparently the parable means that Jesus, like the father in the story is calling them in to the party where the younger son is already caught up in the joyous celebration.

But for me these two are types of investors or even different types of Christian faith. There was an article in The Atlantic magazine this past December entitled, “Did Christianity Cause the Crash?” by Hanna Rosin.

The message that Jesus blesses believers with riches first showed up in the postwar years, at a time when Americans began to believe that greater comfort could be accessible to everyone, not just the landed class. But it really took off during the boom years of the 1990s, and has continued to spread ever since.

Many explanations have been offered for the housing bubble and subsequent crash: interest rates were too low; regulation failed; rising real-estate prices induced a sort of temporary insanity in America’s middle class. But there is one explanation that speaks to a lasting and fundamental shift in American culture—a shift in the American conception of divine Providence and its relationship to wealth.

There is a younger generation of Christians in the United States, often black or latino, who have grasped the brass ring of the American Dream by claiming that “any believer has access the inheritance” and that it comes as a material blessing. And when the famine hits and they lose their house and they lose their job, often an older-brother resentment sets in and says they should lose their unemployment as well. These more conservative investors whose values have been shaped by the Great Depression and the Good War tend to regard such a prosperity gospel as “idolatry,” making God into a “cosmic bellhop.”

But in the parable the Loving Father welcomes both, in fact he goes out to both, spending his dignity and status. His prodigal abundance overwhelms the younger son who is all set to perform his well rehearsed speech and request he be treated like one of the slaves. Interrupted, the younger son loses his place and doesn’t finish, while his father tells the slaves to get for him the family signs of dignity and authority, the ring for his finger and the ceremonial coat of the

clan leader, and sandals for his bleeding feet. He is led into the banquet unrepentant but, as it were, in a daze. The older son must learn from the slaves that his brother, whom he has long since disowned, has returned, and that the old man has killed the fatted calf for him. And indignant, he refuses to come in.

So the fate of these two twins, locked in deadly contempt and escalating their deadly imitation of one another is our own. Will it dawn on us—the eternal, unconditional love and forgiveness of God—or will we hang on to our self-righteousness based identity until it kills us. Our social markets are frozen by un-repentance and un-forgiveness. But forgiveness and compassion, grace and mercy both given and received, are the only way out of our deadly impasse.