

## Short Stories of Jesus: A Man Had Two Sons

Ken Wilson, 1/20/19

A movie can really get you. *The Kids Are All Right*: 2 moms/2 kids. Julianne Moore has affair, marriage on rocks, first flicker of repair after first-born off to college. Walked to Q16 from house on NW side. Walked home on Wagner, thinking. Burst into tears. It's 2010. First born, first-year at UM '71...5<sup>th</sup>-born when I was 41—now wants to leave HS early to go to AU. (Just then, car pulls up...)

*Fences* (Denzel/Viola Davis—August Wilson) Father/Son/Mother/ half-sister—father's hard life makes him hard on his son/wife.

**AJL: *Stories of Jesus don't have a message. they do things to us.***

Cause us to reflect on own life ... which **opens space for God**

Today, most complex story Jesus told. Man has two sons. Younger asks for inheritance; father gives it; son goes far away, spends it all, ends up eating pods in a pig farm—thinks, “I can do better back home” Crafts speech: “Father I'm a louse, not a son—treat me like one of your slaves.” Journeys home. Father sees him coming, runs to meet, embraces, calls to slaves to kill fatted calf: PARTY!

Meanwhile older brother comes in from field, hears commotion. *What's up?* he asks a slave. *It's a party for your brother, who's just home.* Older brother is confused. Father goes out to meet him; now older brother is mad: *What's this? A party for your good-for-nothing son? I'm slaving away all these years you don't throw me a party!* Father says, “Everything I have is yours. Besides we had to celebrate, your brother was dead to us but now he's alive again.” And there it ends ... suspends ... the great unfinished story.

Common to assume it's an allegory: Younger brother, party-loving but sinner, maybe Gentiles. Older brother, party-pooing Jewish opponents of Jesus. Father is God.

Sure, that's one take. But a little self-serving for Gentile Christians now overwhelming majority, take this swipe at Jewish siblings.

But can also read it as a family story on own terms, like *Fences* or *The Kids Are All Right*.  
Natural way for Jewish audience to hear.

**“A man had two sons.”** Instantly a Jewish audience hears echoes of founding stories, feature a man + two sons. Adam: Cain-Abel; Abraham: Ishmael-Isaac. Isaac: Esau-Jacob.

Story with most echoes might be Isaac and his 2 boys Esau-Jacob. In dramatic reversal scene, Isaac is blind, near death—Rebecca, mother of Jacob (the younger) engineers a way for her son to get first-born blessing. She kills two of finest calves to make a savory meal (fatted calf reference). And then Esau, the first-born, comes “in from the fields” just like older brother.

Thing about these older-younger brother pairs: riddle with rivalry; Cain comes in from field and kills younger brother who has offered a calf as sacrifice. Abraham can't sire a child, Sarah gives him her slave woman, Hagar, produces Ishmael; Sarah with Abraham's silent support abuses Hagar and Ishmael (God hears my abuse)—Isaac, the younger who gains precedence over older, has another pair: Esau first twin born, then Jacob. Big rivals! What a mess! And God is involved with these families in the mess.

Jacob-Esau rivalry simmers for decades--major events in Jacob's life (Jacob becomes Israel, Israel's story) driven by rivalry

Sibling rivalry is one of our big hang-ups. Really hard for parents to navigate (Jesse-Maja, possession arrow).

We're addicted to rivalries, aren't we? Get off on it—UM-OSU

Imbedded in our psyche. Jacob-Esau were twins in womb; story goes Esau, on way out first, has Jacob (“heel grasper”) grabbing at his heel. Downhill from there. No brother pairs who get along.

You could read this story and see how Father didn't make it easier on older brother. He immediately calls slaves to kill fatted-calf while older brother is out in fields. He might have called for the older brother first and talked to him. Younger brother has spent his inheritance and come home—now he'll be drawing on the household wealth (older

brother's inheritance). Younger left older at home to care for Father in his old age. They had things to work out! But Father is so glad to see son, he doesn't think of older brother. Intense rivalries make it impossible for everyone. Rivalry, envy, jealousy—what joy-suckers!

Jesus himself had a younger brother, James, at this point in his life, at odds. James tried to do an intervention thinking Jesus mad. Maybe James was jealous of all attention older brother getting.

Story speaks through the silent characters. Where is the **mother**? Sarah was a big player in Ishmael-Isaac rivalry. Rachel in the Jacob-Esau rivalry. Here, no mention. One parent can be so powerful, larger-than-life, other parent becomes invisible.

Or what about the slaves? We ignore slaves—just like we like to forget our nation was built on back of slaves. Mainly ignored in this story too. A fuel for conflict in human family. When older brother says to father, “I’ve slaving for you all these years!” in hearing of real slaves, really slaving. Older brother who has a share in inheritance. Slaves not allowed to accumulate wealth and no inheritance for them, even though help the father generate wealth he passed on to his sons.

This story is occasion to our shared human rivalry addiction. God isn't just present in the telling ... mainly present in our response

Notice: there's no tidy bow on story, tying up all the loose ends.

Previous 2 stories about a lost sheep, lost coin—a search, a find and a party are simple, formulaic. But they set up 3<sup>rd</sup> story.

With humans, it's not as simple as it is with lost sheep and coins, is it? It's complicated. So this story ends unresolved. Party started, but if two brothers can't work it out, how fun can that party be? Ever been to a wedding party where two families can't get along, and fights break out?

This story doesn't end ... it just leaves us hanging ... older brother and Father outside, younger brothers and other members of household inside. Will they come together?

Will mother remain invisible or will she get a voice? When does she get to say, “Great idea having a party honey, but maybe a you got ahead of yourself? Let’s start over—sit these sons down and work things out, and then have a party to celebrate that.”

Will slaves ever get their day and their say? Do they get to say to the older brother? Do they start a labor movement protest? Will the older brother see the light and share some of his inheritance with them? Put some of them in his will?

Rivalry, envy, jealousy—can we reflect on how we are all affected by these and make space for God in all this ... maybe that’s what this story is supposed to do for us. (AJL: stories don’t mean something so much as they do something)

A story like this helps us notice/name rivalry, question our addiction to it. Imagine our lives without it, or less of it.

In this space SC/TBE

Co-existing with 2 other congregations: how can we let God into that space?

This Social Hall reminds me of Julia’s first husband, Oceana’s dad, Richard Bailey—very prominent member of SC.

At first feeling a bit overwhelmed by the legacy of Richard Bailey—his invisible presence. Moving into his house.

Counseling session