

Good parents are fair to their kids. They love all of them, and they don't favor one child over another. The kids get the same privileges, the same responsibilities, adjusted for their age. When kids don't get along with each other, they sometimes test their parents' favor. They may accuse the parents of loving the younger child more than the older, the girl more than the boy, or the good athlete more than the good student. It is hard for children to understand that parents have plenty of love. They can share an abundance of love with each other and with all their children, without anyone getting loved any less.

The parable of the prodigal son shows a family in crisis. A father has two sons. We don't know about the mother. Is she dead? Has she gone away? Is she working in the kitchen? We don't know, so the men in this story have to work things out. The two sons are not very different. The father loves them both. The younger son thinks only of himself: he quits his chores; he takes his inheritance; he travels far away; he spends all his money; and he goes home again because he's hungry. He never sees the effect his decisions have on others.

The older son builds up his own resentment. He dreams of a party with his friends – not with his father or brother; when he complains about his own brother to his father, he calls him “your son” – he cannot bring himself to say, “my brother.” The older son has never left home but the distance between him and his father is great. He thinks his dad is not fair, that he loves his brother more than him.

The father takes a risk with both sons. He gives the younger son what he wants, even though it means he may never see him again. He risks alienating his older son, who stays behind and keeps working. The risk pays off. The father has a joyful reunion with one son, and a heart-to-heart talk with the other.

This is how God loves us. If we are the older brother, faithfully doing the will of our heavenly father, God loves us for it. If we are the younger brother, if we've made bad decisions with all that God gives us, if we get hungry for God and come to our senses, God is already there, running toward us with our reward.

Sometimes we get jealous for God's affection. Just as kids wonder if parents love one child more than another, adults wonder if God loves one of us more than another. We get angry if immigrants get our job, if bad neighbors have good health, if criminals get paroled, or a former lover gets a new relationship. We treat love as if it is limited, as if the more God loves someone else, the less God loves me. But usually we are the ones who limit our love; we love others less generously than we should.

This Lent may be calling us to let go of our jealousies and follow the example of the father who loved his children enough to risk losing them, and who won the admiration of all who hear his story.