

This week's issue of *Visions* magazine for religious education features opinions by students from St. Regis School. The magazine asked this question, "In the parable of the forgiving father (or the prodigal son), what would you do if you were the father?" Here's what our kids said: Blair Friday: "I wouldn't have thrown a party for my son, but I would have been glad that he was home where I knew he was safe." Kevin Barrett: "When my son comes home after wasting his money, I would ask him what he would do if he were in my shoes. Then I would tell him to clean himself up and go to bed." Emily Collins: "I would have had a party for my good son. He deserved to have a party because he probably wanted to leave but didn't." Travis Wells: "I would ask everyone I know if they saw my son while he was gone. When he comes home, I would let him know how glad I am he came home without being hurt. Then I would ground him and let him know that what he did was wrong." Bryce Sullivan: "I would have only given my son half of the money." Katie Storms: "I would have let my son go without the money." Geri Doll: "When my son comes home I would treat him like one of my servants. I would have him work out in the fields with the older son and make him harvest the crop and sleep out in the barn. When he paid back all the money he spent foolishly, I would treat him like a real son."

Now, that's not how the story goes. But these kids know how good parents treat bad children. Everyone agrees that the older son who complains about the party has a point. Which raises the question--Is the father in the parable too forgiving? Is God too forgiving? Some people spend their entire lives doing the right thing, sacrificing for Christ, living a model life, and die a sad death. Other people live a rotten life, filled with sin, and then convert to Christ either on their deathbed or in the gas chamber. If God forgives them and gives them the same reward as those who do good, is that fair? Shouldn't there be a better system of punishment?

Maybe so, but that doesn't seem to be what this parable is about. It's about happiness. Who's happy in this story anyway? One son thinks happiness lies in money; he takes what is his, spends it all, and finds unhappiness instead. The other son thinks happiness lies in fairness; he thinks punishing someone else will make him happier. The only one who seems truly happy is the father who forgives the sins of both his sons. Any good parent would punish. The best parents forgive.