

At the end of summer in a Missouri rivertown, one kid got rowdy and pushed an outhouse off the cliff. The mayor rounded up the kids and demanded, "Who pushed the outhouse over the cliff?" Nobody admitted it. The mayor said, "When George Washington was a boy, his father asked him who chopped down the cheery tree and George said, 'I cannot tell a lie; I did it.' His father did not punish George. Now, who pushed the outhouse over the cliff?" One kid was moved by the story and raised his hand. "I cannot tell a lie; I did it." The mayor took the kid by the ear and beat him blow after blow. The kid said, "Wait a minute! George Washington's father didn't punish him for chopping down the cherry tree." The mayor said, "George Washington's father was not *in* the cherry tree."

When we admit we're wrong, we don't often get the results we expect. This is clearly the case with the prodigal son. He asked for his inheritance early, then squandered it on travel, food, and sex. He comes home expecting to be made a servant and his father treats him like a king. The result was not what he thought.

This is even more peculiar when you consider why the son went back to his father. It was for food. He was starving, he had no money, but he knew he could get a meal at home. (Sounds like my family.) He comes home the same selfish kid who left. And still his father treats him like a king.

The older son says this isn't fair. He stayed home, he slaved under the hot sun, he was faithful, and he's never had a welcome like his brother got.

I can imagine him sulking outside the house with questions that nag all of us. Can you hear this voice? "Have I missed out on something? All my life I've been told to be good--to love my family, to do my work, to save my money, and I have been faithful. My brother takes from our family, leaves his job, and squanders his money. He has a good time while he's away, and a great time when he comes home. Have I missed out on something? Have I been faithful for nothing?"

The father's response to the older son is very wise. He says, "You are always with me and everything I have is yours." The older son was so distracted by the evening's party that he overlooked the joy of his entire life: love, security, and satisfaction are his, day in and day out.

The story we call the prodigal son is the story of two sons. One's life is diligence and peace. The other's is sin and repentance. The joy of one brother is fidelity; the joy of the other is repentance.

In the world some people make the headlines. They make news when the sin, they make news when they repent. Other people never get attention. They are good; they are faithful; their lives rarely surprise.

The father of the two sons knows that each is happy. One knows the exhilaration of reconciliation; the other knows the joy of peace. Neither one need envy the other.