

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Mar 3rd 2018

Today's readings are about forgiveness and the mercy of God, but there is another angle to forgiveness and that deals with justice. God is merciful and forgives our sins whatever they are, if we are contrite, if we are really sorry, and if we ask. But how does that relate to responsibility for our actions? In an episode of *The Simpsons* Bart once said he planned to live a debauched life and go for a deathbed conversion. But it hardly seems fair to the people who work hard all their lives, live good moral lives, do everything right, if then some sinful upstart gets the same deal in the end.

In the story of the prodigal son, the bad boy takes his inheritance early, leaves home, and squanders his money. The good brother stays there and helps his father, works on the land and has to wait for his recompense. When the bad brother comes home to rejoicing and a party, I can understand why the good brother feels it's an injustice. The good boy has worked hard and gained no reward. It's as if the bad boy is being rewarded for being bad. And people should be held accountable for their actions. The bad brother should not get a reward for his debauchery, but should he be abandoned? Like Frost said, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in." The prodigal son is not asking for riches or even heir status. He asks to be treated as well as the hired hands. The father is not saying that he will even divide the property again for equal shares to the boys. The bad boy has already spent his inheritance. The father tells the good boy that everything is his, but that his brother who was gone has returned, and that is indeed cause for celebration. Celebrating the bad brother's return doesn't really hurt the good brother – he still has everything he has earned and worked for.

Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors. This was not cool. These were not good people to be hanging around with. The implication was that anyone who associated with these sorts of people was like-minded. But Jesus had a mission to help people, to turn them from their wicked ways to a better path. The people who were already on the right path did not have as much need of him as those who were heading the wrong way. The good people who are already doing the right thing already have their reward in heaven, but if a sinner, someone who had been lost could return to the right way, isn't that worthy of rejoicing?

Tamora Whitney-Creighton University's English Department