

“UNFINISHED SYMPHONY”

2 Corinthians 5:16-20 Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Perhaps no passage of Scripture has inspired more sermonizing than this passage from Luke’s gospel, which is known most commonly as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We all know the story. We all know the moral of the story.

- Foolish son takes his share of the inheritance, leaves home, wastes the money, becomes sorry, returns home expecting chastisement, but instead is welcomed home into the loving arms of his father.
- Moral: The father (meaning God) loves the son (meaning us) no matter how bad, stupid or undeserving we are. End of story.

Well, that analysis of the parable is true, as far as it goes. But the problem is, it doesn’t go far enough. This parable, you see, is really like unfinished symphony; a mystery which is left for the hearer to solve. And my hasty analysis of the parable overlooked the mystery and the challenge it offers.

I love English mystery novels. Ever since a friend introduced me to them by giving me a copy of *The Nine Tailors*, by Dorothy Sayers, I have been hooked. But since then, I have discovered the ultimate mystery novel. It’s called *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, and it’s written by none other than Charles Dickens. This was his only attempt at writing mysteries, the genre having just been invented. But the novel stands alone among the great mysteries for this reason: after developing the plot to a very complex and captivating point, the reader overcome with intrigue, Dickens died, leaving no clue as to how the book was to end. Serious students of mystery have spent years, even decades, trying to weave together the scores of loose ends, in an attempt to solve this mystery.

Likewise, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a mystery if you will; or maybe a symphony in three movements, with the final movement unwritten, or rather, left for the reader to write.

- **FIRST MOVEMENT:** The son estranges himself from his family.
- **SECOND MOVEMENT:** Painfully aware of his mistake, the son, with a repentant heart, returns to his family where he is forgiven by and reconciled to his father.
- **THIRD MOVEMENT (unwritten):** The Prodigal son and his brother are reconciled and both return to the family

We will concern ourselves primarily with this third and unwritten movement. Fortunately for us, Jesus left us some valuable clues as to how the mystery was to be solved. Also fortunately for us, the Apostle Paul gathered clues on this same subject and set them out for us in the fifth chapter of 2 Corinthians. Let’s look over our clues, then. Put on your Sherlock Holmes hats, and grab your magnifying glasses and we will attempt to solve “The Case of the Unfinished Symphony.”

As detectives who must also be composers. We’ll start by asking some basic questions:

1. What is the main motive (theme) of the symphony?
2. How is the motive developed in the first two movements as we are carried through dissonance and discord?
3. How, then, should the third (unfinished) movement be developed, resolving to the satisfying and eternal “tonic?”

WHAT IS THE MAIN MOTIVE OF THE SYMPHONY?

In a word, the answer is “*reconciliation*.” The Prodigal Son is reconciled to his father. The action yet to be completed – that is, the final movement – is for the two sons to be reconciled.

Reconciliation is the center around which all the action takes place. We yearn for the two sons to be reconciled, and for the elder son to come to the banquet the father has prepared.

But what does “reconciliation” really mean? Far more than just making friends after an argument, the word suggests almost *a transformation of the reconciled person’s nature*.

Paul speaks of a person’s reconciliation with Christ as being “*united to Christ*”¹ or being “*in Christ*”², or being “*joined to Christ*”.³ And what is the result of this reconciliation? Paul writes, “...*if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.*”⁴

To be “in Christ” then, to be reconciled, is to be radically transformed, to be created all over again. Not merely improved or remodeled, but *remade radically*—the change is from the roots of one’s being. You might even say that to be “in Christ” is to live life with a new motive or purpose.

- Old desires and purposes are replaced by new ones
- The world, and other people, appear new also, since our attitude and perspective are new.
- Some things we valued lose their appeal
- Other things gain importance for us
- Values are transformed.

Ever wake up to a clear, sunny day after weeks of clouds, or come home from a stay in the hospital? Tastes are more vivid, colors more vibrant, the ordinary becomes suddenly wonderful.

This is our first important clue, then: *the Prodigal Son, after his reconciliation with his father, is no longer the same old person returned home again*. He has been changed, and he will live his life from that point on with a new motive.

Paul has more to say about reconciliation, the main motive of our unfinished symphony. He says, “*All this (our re-creation through reconciliation) is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself..*”

All this is from God. God takes the initiative to reconcile us to himself. That is not a burden we must take upon ourselves. Nor is it something we could accomplish alone, even if we wanted to. God takes the initiative. And so, in the parable, while the son was still a long way off, the father ran to him, throwing his arms around him and kissing him. Without waiting for a word from his son, the father forgave him and welcomed him back home.

And so, this is our next important clue: *with reconciliation, the initiative lies with the injured party, not with the offender*.

We have looked over the main motive of the symphony, which is reconciliation. But if we are to complete the third movement, we should look briefly at how the first two movements were developed.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIRST TWO MOVEMENTS

At the risk of displaying my ignorance of music, let me suggest that one of the things which gives a musical composition drama and interest is the tension which is created by discord or dissonance as the listener anticipates its resolution. Our symphony is no exception. The initial harmony of the family is broken by discord as the younger of two sons leaves home.

- Submotive: the younger son desires to live life his own way, apart from the family.

This dissonance appears to be resolved when the son returns home to find that his father has forgiven him. But discord is introduced again, as the older son splits the family by refusing to reconcile with his brother – thus severing the family’s peace, for in remaining estranged from his brother he creates a rift between himself and his father.

¹ NEB

² RSV, KJB, NIV

³ TEV

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:17, RSV

- Submotive: Older brother is jealous and resentful. Can't understand why the younger brother was rewarded for disobedience when he has never been rewarded for faithfulness; wants recognition; feels he is better than younger brother; will not accept the offer of forgiveness.

THIRD CLUE—*Reconciliation cannot take place until forgiveness has been offered received and accepted.* The question remaining, then, is:

III. HOW SHOULD THE THIRD AND UNFINISHED MOVEMENT BE DEVELOPED?

Let's review our clues, which incidentally, are the main points of this sermon:

1. Clue one: once a person has experienced reconciliation, he or she is remade, and lives life with a new motive, and even a new sense of being.
2. Clue two: reconciliation is best initiated by the person who has received the injury, not by the offender.
3. Clue three: reconciliation can not take place until forgiveness has been both offered and received.

Following the direction set by these clues, here's how this detective sees the mystery of the Unfinished Symphony solved:

Younger brother (the Prodigal), changed by his reconciling experience with his father, looks upon his brother with new eyes. He recognizes not only what older brother has contributed to the family, but also what he (younger brother) has missed by resenting and competing with his brother rather than befriending him. First dissonant sub-motive is reviewed, then resolved. Main motive restated tentatively.

Prodigal son goes to older brother and offers to do both shares of the work around the farm while his brother does the traveling and exploring he has always dreamed of doing.

Older brother, moved by his sibling's selfless gesture, realizes that all he has ever really wanted to do was farm. He offers little brother full partnership in the remaining property. Together they hurry to seek their father's advice, filled with excitement about the future. (Second, dissonant sub-motive reviewed, overpowered by Prodigal's new motive. Older brother's new motive stated and strengthened by Prodigal's new motive. Main motive stated decisively and finally.) The symphony ends.

But what does this mean for us? It means that if we can humble ourselves to accept God's offer of forgiveness, we may be reconciled to him. When we are, the event radically changes us, so that even our motives will be new. We will find it possible to let go of our self-centeredness and to live instead for others. We will find it possible to give up our snobbery, no more considering ourselves superior because of external things like social position or intelligence, theological or political stance, gender, or looks. Instead, we will be able to regard those whom we meet with a true understanding of their worth in God's sight.

Then we may even have the courage to accept God's task for us to take the initiative in reconciling others. That's what Paul meant when he said we are ambassadors for Christ. For Paul, reconciliation is a ministry. There is no higher vocation for a believer than that of changing enemies into friends. That is the challenge of the unfinished symphony.

The unfinished symphony is not just a story. It is this world where God would establish the Kingdom—unfinished where there is even one left unreconciled. We, the church, are privileged to have a part in the writing of the final movement of the symphony, which Jesus described as the Kingdom of God. With God's help, and with motives that are new, we can be ambassadors—even composers—for Christ. Amen.