

This is a sermon in story in three parts. Listening to it closely might just uncover a new life-changing insight for you. It’s all about two siblings, a Father, and an inheritance, which always makes for a good story. But in this telling I’d like to probe some depths not usually plumbed. Part 1.

Have you ever heard of a seep well? I just heard about them last week- from a guy who was raised in the upstate of South Carolina, while I was with him at a conference.¹

John grew up on a farm - an old one, dating back to the early 1800’s. The farmhouse where he grew up in the ‘50’s had never really been modernized. The electric lines were run along the baseboards, then up the plaster walls to outlets. There was indoor plumbing, but it came as an addition- built on the back of the house. The water supply remained primarily what it always had been, an old well that stood 20 feet behind the back porch door. The water from the well was always cold and pure, and was all the more remarkable because the well never ran dry. Even in the hottest summer months, when other families nearby would be forced to go to the nearby lake for their drinking water, this well faithfully yielded up its cool, clear, refreshing water.

Eventually the time came when family fortunes improved, and it was decided to modernize the house. An electric stove was purchased to replace the pot-bellied stove, and modern plumbing was installed. This necessitated a modern well, and a new, deeper artesian well was drilled a hundred feet in front of the house, near the road. No longer needed, the old well out back was sealed over to be kept in reserve should a time arise when for some reason the artesian well would not suffice.

So things stood for several years until one day, when moved by curiosity and old loyalties, John decided to uncover the old well to inspect its condition.

As he removed its cover, he fully expected to see the same dark, cool, moist depths he had known so well as a boy. But he was in for a shock; the well was bone dry.

Later he learned what had happened. A seep well, the kind drawn from out back, was fed by numerous tiny underground capillaries/rivulets along which seeps a constant supply of water. As long as water is drawn from the well, more water moves into it along the rivulets, keeping these tiny apertures clear and open. But when such a well isn’t used and the water isn’t regularly drawn, the tiny rivulets close up. This family well, which had run without fail for so many years, was dry not simply because there was no water but because it had not been used in so long. When it was time to go to this well for a drink, for refreshment- or survival- there was nothing there.

Now the seep well, which exists in the geological strata of our earths’ makeup- also exists in the human soul.

The human soul is like this well. What happened to the old well can also happen to people. By not going to the well, by not probing the depths of who we are and whose we are, recognizing our humanness

and mortality- our souls can shrivel, wither and dry up- just like a seep well, so that when a time comes that we need the resources found only there- we come up empty, angry, frustrated, helpless, and hopeless; not a good place to be, at all. End of Part 1.

Part 2. The seep well story fits the parable of the prodigal son better than any other I know, but likely in a different way than you've heard it before. You know this story; it almost preaches itself. But you've likely paid most of your attention to the first of the sons in the story - the one we normally call prodigal; the one who ran away- and lived high on the hog, that is- until he was broke- and then who literally lived with the hogs ... the one who recognized his fault, repented, and returned.

This is part of the story- and it's perhaps the juiciest, the part we can get our hands on and celebrate because it is all wrapped up nice and neat at the end, with a good moral to the story and people living happily ever after. But it's only *one part* of the story; because Jesus, the greatest of storytellers, will not let this whole story end.

My theory about this parable is that if, for 2,000 years now- we've been left hanging for an end to this story to come, then our Lord must intend for us to do something more with this story than just be relieved & happy with the good part.²

So instead of being content with the runaway son returned home, I really think we're supposed to pay more attention to the elder son and the message he carries. Having a quick look at his situation is telling. The Older Prodigal brother claims he's been "slaving" for the Father. Not likely. No son, especially a first-born son, would slave for a father who had so much wealth and *so many hired servants*. After receiving the inheritance and staying on the estate to manage it right along side the Father, any work done by the Older Brother would not have involved a whole lot of straining his back or dirtying his hands. To say that he "slaved" is self-serving hyperbole. More likely than not, any Older Brother in this situation would have been put in charge of running the estate, sort of like the CEO with the Father remaining the principal owner. There are holes in the Older Brother's case of trying to play the victim.³

So if Jesus was an ordinary storyteller, then he just would have said, "Let's give the elder brother a rotten ending, he deserves it." But Jesus doesn't. He gives the story no ending. The parable ends with a freeze frame. It ends just like that, open-ended.

The sound goes dead - the servants may be scurrying about in the background with the wine and the veal - but Jesus shows us only the freeze frame of the father and the elder brother.

The older son just stands there feeling betrayed, left out, ignored- and totally justified in every way. His well- his resources of feelings of care for his younger brother, which might well have run free and flowing in earlier years, are now bone dry, and he's left still stewing in his own anger, frustration, jealousy & desperation - all borne out of disuse. The elder son's self-righteousness and indignation is matched only by the extravagant generosity of his all-forgiving Father, and we're left with an unease about it all, just hanging on a thread of hope that this older brother might get the message - will he, ever? That's the way the parable has ended for 2,000 years. End of Part 2. Part 3.

A writer for Presbyterians Today magazine, Kristine Haig, recently wrote a short piece about plants, growth and Lent.⁴ Once in late winter she had to call the plumber- because the plumbing outside her house had backed up.

To her surprise, the plumber explained to her that it wasn't uncommon at all to find tree roots clogging large pipes in winter - "*tree's leaves* may grow more in summer, he said, but the **roots** grow more in **winter**." Now, taking this metaphor into our personal lives; it is in times of apparent stillness & quiet that some of our most helpful growth takes place. As winter now draws to a close and we round the bend midway in Lent, this bit of spiritual guidance from nature helps. During Lent we attend to the foundations of our faith- the 'roots' of our lives in Christ. During Lent we take time to discern what for us holds the center of our lives together; for both our personal discipleship and public service depend upon the strength of our inner relationship with God.

As I said earlier- the human soul is like a well; and it is also like pipes and roots. What happened to the old seep well can also happen to people; they can become empty- hollow- or totally clogged up. The self-righteousness and jealousy that overcame the older brother in Jesus' parable can also take place in us. By not going to the well, by not reexamining the depths of who we are and whose we are, by not recognizing our humanness and mortality, and who we are making this journey of life with- our souls can shrivel, wither and dry up- just like a seep well, so that when a time comes that we need the resources to be found there- we come up empty, angry, frustrated, helpless and hopeless; not a good place to be, at all.

In order to be able to get to the water we need for life- the resources that help us stay in touch with the depths of who we are, how we are to be rooted, grounded and nourished by all that God gives us in life, it is necessary for us to have help. Life is not meant to be lived isolated and alone.

Jesus didn't just come to tell us good stories. Jesus, the Christ, is the link we are given to use to connect us to the depths of ourselves, each other and thus to God.

During Lent, God in Christ reaches out to us; in our quiet times, through the decisions we make, as new officers of this congregation and those who will be supporting them- in our prayers and through relationships with others, not for us to begrudge the goodness given to others, but to find God's bounty waiting for each one of us, in greater fullness than we can ever be aware.

During Lent, we are granted the gift of time- of quiet reflection, of the stories of the faith and of our lives, underscored by the ever-steady presence of God our Father, who is embarrassingly in love with us, and unable to stop loving us, so that the pure love that holds us close when we are near and when we are far away will be enough to guide us true and faithful, elder and younger siblings that we are. Amen.

¹ This story comes from John Sanford, [The Teachings of Jesus...](#)

² I've been led to this conclusion by Father Robert Capon- in his [Parables of Jesus.](#)

³ My good friend and colleague, Fred Lyon, passed this insight along to me in an e-mail exchange about this lectionary passage.

⁴ Presbyterians Today, magazine April 2007.