Today’s Gospel passage tells the parable of the “Father and his Two Sons.” A closer look at each reveals how all three have something important to teach us.

First, the Father. In many ways, he is the key character. His extraordinary patience with his younger son’s terrible request — to claim his inheritance now is equivalent to saying that the parent is dead — and then there is the father’s generous compassion when the sinner returns. Both tell us about the “extravagance” of God’s unconditional love. That is why many commentators have noted that the story should be called not the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but rather the “Parable of the Prodigal Father”— who is a spend-thrift with his love.

Genesis teaches that we are made in God’s image, so we are most ourselves, our best selves, when we are like to the God in whose image we are made. Clearly, Luke’s account highlights that we believe in a “God with wide arms” — and so we too are our best selves when we have wide arms, and have room not simply for sinners but also (as Luke’s Jesus especially shows again and again) the poor, the marginalized, the outcast, the stranger. In our world, with all the political controversy about building walls and accepting refugees and immigrants, the message is clear. Yes, we can argue about “how” to make room for those who are different but, at least for believers, the “that we should make room” is not up for discussion.

The younger son’s story also has its lessons. His act of bravado and then squandering of his inheritance are evidence of his immaturity and irresponsibility at best or his unrestrained self-centeredness and narcissism at worst. But, perhaps what can actually teach us something positive is “his decision to go home”. Granted he seems to be making the move primarily because he is hungry and his words of repentance are almost an afterthought, but nonetheless he takes that first step of “returning to his father”. Not only is that a Lenten invitation to each of us in our own lives, but it is also a call to support others who are trying to turn their lives around. One thinks, for example, of someone on parole who is looking for a job and needs a potential employer to “take a risk” and give him or her a chance to “start again” on the road to “coming home”.

Thirdly, there is the elder son. He is the one who refuses to join the celebration. (Notice the contrast between his words “that son of yours” and the father’s reply, you mean “your brother.”) Clearly, the elder brother feels that the father has been unjust: too lenient with his younger son and neglectful of his older son. “For years now I have slaved for you … yet you never gave me so much as a kid to celebrate with my friends.” However, what really stands out is the elder son’s
inability to see what a loving relationship is all about: not just a transactional quid pro quo but a largeness of heart that is seen in the father’s “wide arms”. Indeed, when juxtaposed with the father’s response to the prodigal’s return, the stance of the elder brother is seen as both small and tinged with hubris. (Augustine once wrote: “Pride infects even good works, in order to destroy them.)

To say it again, what makes love love is that it is freely given. It is never earned (like the way you “earn respect”), but rather love is priceless precisely because it is unearned (like the way parents care for a new born, who clearly has not done anything to earn their love). In the Christian perspective such “unconditional love” mirrors God’s love, which begins in the small circle of a family but is meant to overflow into the ever-widening circles that include ever more of God’s children — especially those whom others would exclude but we would include. Again, it’s not about “that son or daughter of yours” but rather about “my sister or brother.

Joe Serano, O. Praem., received his doctorate of sacred theology from Catholic University and has served as Director of the Institute for Religion and Culture of Daylesford Abbey, Paoli, PA.