

We are used to Hollywood stories and Hollywood endings. And this parable, sometimes called the parable of the Prodigal Son, seems to be that kind of story – A child who rebels at an early age and wants to go out to see the world and experience everything the world has. It could be the Amish boy or girl today who is given a time to go away and give up the life, traditions and family ties that have nurtured them through the years. Yes, it is a life of hard work, but it also is a life with strong family ties and amazing community support and a deep faith as core ingredients. But during those years of transition from adolescent to adults, they are allowed to leave – go out into the world, experience the other side – drinking, carousing, all the lure and glitter of the other life. And the parents wait – wondering if they will ever come home. And some, like our prodigal in the parable do return home to joy and welcome and great gratitude. And the Hollywood ending is complete.

But we call them Hollywood ending for a reason. Because for others, they are not real, they are contrived or sifted and separated from other, less than happy-ending stories that punctuate our lives and fragment families.

Brianne Matthews had a 14-4 pitching record as a freshman last year for Mater Dei (Calif.) High School. Always an overachiever, Matthews had gotten it done on and off the softball diamond. She carried a 4.0 grade point average at academically testing Mater Dei school and she was committed to pursue a career as a neonatologist. Despite being only a high school sophomore, Matthews already had accepted a full-ride college scholarship offer to play softball for national powerhouse Arizona. She was A phenom.

Socially? Forget about it. At 16, Matthews had tons of friends thanks to a dynamic personality and her huge softball following. Considered the No.1 young pitching prospect in the nation, Matthews had a way for attracting crowds and had grown into a Pied Piper character for the sport.

For unknown reasons, though, Matthews did not feel right in this role and on Feb. 25, she killed herself hours after returning home from softball practice.

Like the two young women from Interboro High standing in front of a train, for some unexplicable reason she unable to face life and leaving a family and a whole community mourning.

No Hollywood ending here – just the nightmare of any parent or community who has experienced such tragedy, or whose child has run away so that they still wake at night, wondering where a child is, whether they are still okay or even alive, worried about all the dangers they face and the predators who live on the prodigals and strays of the world.

Only a parent who has lost a child could understand the anguish of waiting parents; Only a father who has lost a son, can reach out with compassion and acceptance to parents who grieve. And so God reaches out, to heal the pain and restore life. But even here, there is waiting involved – waiting for pain to ease, for life to become bearable, for a hunger to find meaning in life again.

That might be why this parable is better called the Waiting Father, or the Loving Father and it reminds us that God not only rejoices when a prodigal returns, and when a broken relationship is healed; but God weeps and embraces the parents and community of children lost and lives left empty. Here too, healing is needed, trust in God's love and grace has to be renewed because it feels as if God let us down or abandoned us.

Sometimes we forget that God also lost a Son in a senseless act of violence.

William P. Young's book *The Shack* reflects this other kind of separation from God. It was not a prodigal child but an innocent young girl, Missy, who was murdered, and the tragedy had wounded her entire family, as the "what if's and should have's" that haunt those left behind by tragedy eroded family ties. For Mack, Missy's father, it had the most profound effect, leaving him empty, depressed and a shell of his true self. At the core of his anger and despair was the loss of a relationship with God. The book is compelling because it is about God's efforts to restore the relationship, to help Mack live with unanswerable questions, renew his faith in God's love and restore his life.

As I read this Parable of the Loving Father, I thought of the Mack's of the world, the parents' who wait and wonder or the parents whose waiting is over, but the agony of loss will never leave their thoughts. That's when I realized that this parable is about both parent and child, about anyone who has experienced the pain of loss, or has been wounded by life and as a result is angry and feels distant from God. Anyone who has left home and values behind and gone out to experience all that the world has to offer and as

a result finds themselves separated from God. No matter what the reason, God grieves the loss of relationship with his children.

That's when I discovered something else that I never really noticed before about this parable. The party is for the Father, not for the prodigal son. I know that sounds crazy, but think about it. The son expected everyone to treat him like a hired hand, the attitude of the older brother would have been the attitude of everyone -- But the Father, the only one with the power to make him a son again, restores the relationship. It is the restored relationship that is celebrated. And the party is the public demonstration that the Father has restored the relationship. It gives everyone permission to rejoice in the return of the prodigal and treat him like a son. And it reminds us that God delights in reclaiming the broken and shattered lives of humanity.

So in both the parable of the waiting/loving father, and in *the Shack*, God's delight in reclaiming the broken and shattered lives of humanity is the theme and we are the beneficiaries of stories that remind us of the deep love of God who understands and accepts our anger and pain; a God who understands our waywardness and our lost-ness in the world; And a God who rejoices in a relationship restored, anger healed, life renewed. We are the community invited to the party, every week we gather and God is here, waiting for someone who has been away to come back, for someone who has been distant to be renewed – Always there is someone – and God calls out -- break the bread, pour the wine – my child has returned. Amen.

