

Art & Belief: The Two Sons

By Gayle Goudy, fellow Grace parishioner and art historian



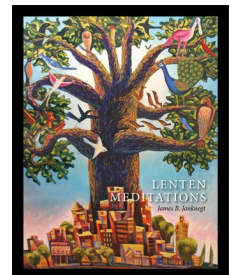
A theme in the Art & Belief discussion series has been the reinterpretation of Classical imagery to Christian meaning. But how have artists adapted visual images of our time and place to help us better understand scripture? James B. Janknegt's painting, *The Two Sons* (2000) retells the parable of the Prodigal Son using 21st century imagery.

The younger son receives his living father's inheritance and emigrates by airplane to "a distant country," perhaps the artist's own Austin, TX, suggested by the prickly pear cactus. The light reflected on the airplane transitions from the golden light over the father's idyllic farm to a city lit by red neon lights. A blue vignette alludes to the unwholesome activities where he "squandered his wealth in living wild." This son sits "in need" on the steps outside a McDonald's Restaurant identified by its distinctively shaped roof and golden arches sign. The logo on his shirt shows that he "hired himself out" in a job that earns less than enough to cover living expenses. Next to him, an overturned trashcan spills wrappers, paper cups, fries, and half-eaten sandwiches. He cradles his head in his hand longing "to fill his stomach" with the low-quality food from the garbage. Instead, he decides to go home to his father to confess, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son, make me like one of your hired [workers]."

A bus station, bus, taxi, car and truck (hitch-hiking?), shoe, and bare foot show his long journey home culminating in a bovine skull signifying death. In the center of the painting, he walks along the same path where his father runs to him with arms wide open in jubilation: "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" Behind the father, three workers bring a jacket, a ring, and a wide-brimmed hat.

The right panel features the older son who had been working on the farm when he learned his father has ordered a celebration for his brother's return complete with a pig roasting on a spit—mmm BBQ! In jealous anger, Janknegt depicts the older brother breaking his guitar over his knee—no song of rejoice in him. He refuses to even go to the party feeling like his obedience has been overlooked and unappreciated while his brother's disobedience is rewarded. To him, this celebration is unjust because he only feels worthy of his father's love because he has followed the rules, and his selfish and arrogant younger brother is not worthy of love because he has broken the rules. He believes in law, but the father is demonstrating grace. This parable is as much about the uncharitable actions of the older brother—his self-righteousness and refusal to forgive.

Janknegt illustrates both brothers as distraught. The younger is in a dehumanizing world of garbage, malnourishment, and economic exploitation. However, the elder is distraught despite his environment of love, celebration, and abundance and he chooses to exclude and hate. At each man's foot is an icon. The bus station indicates that after this punishing experience, the younger brother is going home. The skull at the foot of the older brother shows that despite a lovely and wholesome life, his attitude of unforgiveness is leading to a spiritual death. Above both sons, the face of the father looks at each son with unconditional love, grace, forgiveness and reconciliation. Will the older son accept his father's grace too?



Janknegt, *Lenten Meditations Book*