

“The Prodigal Family”

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

So, Jesus was hanging out with the only crowd that ever seemed to want to hang out with Him . . . Tax Collectors, Sinners—which referred to anyone from a person with a skin disease, to prostitutes, and so forth—anyone on the margins who was deemed an outcast, not good enough . . . folks that the self-righteous religious leaders of Jesus’ day looked down on, judged, and thought weren’t worth a lick.

So, we are told that these religious leaders—these Pharisees and teachers of the law did what they usually did when they found Jesus hanging out with His peeps—they “muttered” and they grumbled, and they judged and they looked down their noses at the whole scene with absolute disgust and said, “*THIS MAN WELCOMES SINNERS AND EATS WITH THEM.*”

And so, because of that, Jesus told THEM this parable.

To understand the radical love shown by the father in this story, we need to look at the context in which the story was originally told.

Jesus starts the parable with the younger son asking his father for an advance on his inheritance. In Jesus’ shame/honor culture, asking a living parent for an early inheritance was not only rude, but it was the equivalent of saying to dear old dad: “I wish you were dead.” And children who did such things would lose their respect and honor, and their community would shun them . . . very much like the religious rulers shunned anyone they considered to be a “sinner.”

Like I said, those listening to this parable would have been absolutely shocked by the action of the father and the younger son. No one should do such a thing. It takes the younger son a few days to gather everything he has inherited and then travel to a foreign country.

Back to the father for a moment. His love is so strong and so big that it makes no demands but is willing to wait patiently. It’s a love that forgives and welcomes home. His love will not rescue us out of or stop us from going to the distant country. Instead, it redeems the life that we lived in that place.

That is good news for those of us who travel to the distant country; and we all go there at some point.

So, the son wastes his money on what we are told is “wild living.” And when a famine hits the country, he’s in big trouble. And this famine becomes the instrument of the younger son’s salvation. What do I mean by that? Only when he hits rock bottom, does he even consider heading home.

God often uses tough circumstances in our lives to bring us to our senses—to bring us to Himself again, He doesn’t force our hand, but He is always inviting, always waiting, always looking . . . God always stands ready to redeem our misery. God is in the business of making Easters out of Good Fridays.

It would be hard to overstate the depths of this young man’s humiliation. This is the lowest he can possibly fall in an honor/shame culture and context. Jewish people were to avoid all dealings with pigs, but this young man is reduced to serving pigs—setting their table—bringing their dinner—being pushed and shoved by them—smelling them—tolerating them—envying them—even coveting their pig-food!

And so, the younger son’s “aha” moment has less to do with repentance than it does with self-interest. He is a servant to a pig-farmer, and he is hungry. He used to have it all; now he has nothing. Then he compares his situation with that of his father’s servants, who have plenty to eat. And it dawns on him that he could improve his lot in life if he could talk his dad into hiring him as a servant.

He knows that being reinstated as a son is out of the question. We should give him some credit, though, for taking this first step. His father is his only hope, and he must be desperately afraid that his father will out-right reject his pleadings.

Imagine his anxiety as he walked the long, dusty road home. We can imagine him practicing his little speech over and over again as he walked. But as fearful as he must have been, he kept putting one foot in front of the other—his hope and desperation being stronger than his fear.

And what has the boy’s father been doing the whole time he has been gone? He has been waiting and watching and praying for him to come home! Again, VERY RADICAL for a First Century Palestinian culture—unheard of, really. Jesus says that “while” the younger son “*WAS STILL A LONG WAY OFF, HIS FATHER SAW HIM AND WAS FILLED WITH COMPASSION FOR HIM; HE RAN TO HIS SON AND KISSED HIM.*”

Let’s stop here for a minute.

The father “ran” to his son. This might not sound strange at all in our 21st Century American Context. But in the First Century Palestinian Context honor/shame culture Jesus was living in, it was madness!!! But this is a real Resurrection moment!

The son must look terrible coming down the road—sweating—caked with dirt—dressed in his filthy pig pen clothing. There is no telling when he ate his last meal. As soon as the father gets close enough to hear the son begins to sputter out his recited lines: “*FATHER, I HAVE SINNED AGAINST HEAVEN AND AGAINST YOU. I AM NO LONGER WORTHY TO BE CALLED YOUR SON...*” But that is as far as he can get.

His father cuts him off before he can ask to be treated like a hired hand. In this culture the father would have been unbelievably generous to even receive the son back at all with only a mild rebuke.

But this father goes WAY beyond that. He jumps into action to take care of the son’s situation. “Dress this young man in my son’s clothing!” “Dress him for a party!” “Get him something to eat!”

This is far better than the son could have even dreamed, and much more than he deserves. It is a moment of full and amazing grace. The robe, the ring, and the shoes give him dignity. They denote status. They signify that the father is welcoming this young man back as his son.

But the father doesn’t stop there: “*BRING THE FATTED CALF AND KILL IT. LET’S HAVE A FEAST AND CELEBRATE. FOR THIS SON OF MINE WAS DEAD AND IS ALIVE AGAIN; HE WAS LOST AND IS FOUND. SO, THEY BEGAN TO CELEBRATE.*”

Back to context.

Meat was not part of the daily diet at this time but was kept for special occasions. And when a special occasion arose, a family would usually slaughter a sheep or a goat, because the smaller animal was a smaller investment or sacrifice. They would keep the fatted calf for HUGE celebrations, for, perhaps, when the entire village would be coming together. In slaughtering the fatted calf, the father is involving the entire community—sending them the clear message that he has restored his son to sonship and therefore to community membership as well. So, everyone is partying. Everyone is celebrating.

Everyone... except... except... the older son.

He refuses to enter the party—which would have been a shocking rebuke to his father. And the father, he doesn’t rebuke him back, but instead pleads with him

to change his mind. And so, the father who extended extravagant grace to the younger son, offers it to the older son as well. This is really good news for those of us who may relate more to the older son in this story.

It can be easier to hate the hater than to hate the lost sinner. It's sometimes easier to forgive a wayward younger brother than a prideful, judgmental older brother—but the father's love is broad enough to include both his disobedient sons.

But you know what? It's so easy to categorize ourselves as the younger brother who comes home, but real life is more complicated than that. I think that if we are honest with ourselves and with God, we will admit that at different times in our lives we can find ourselves in either role. How easy it is for us to flip from asking forgiveness for ourselves to denying forgiveness for others.

So, there are many lessons from this parable. We are not only loved, but we are meant to love. We are not only forgiven; we are meant to forgive.

Where are you this morning? **Leaving home?** The Father offers you freedom and you are loved.

Are you in the pig pens of life? The Father is waiting patiently, and you are loved.

Coming home? The Father will protect you and you are loved.

Finally home? The Father has prepared a banquet and you are loved and celebrated.

Are you standing outside the Kingdom judging the sinners and angry that the Father welcomes them? God is pleading for you to come into the party—for we are all equal sinners and we are all equally loved.

Obviously, this is a parable about who God is and what God's love looks like for every last one of us—no matter who we are and what we have done. He loves us in the brothel and in the pig sty. He loves us as we look down on others and think ourselves better than other sinners. And He always rejoices and throws a party when we turn to Him.

This is who God is. And we are greatly blessed. We have a lot to be thankful for and a great invitation. God is so good, so loving, so unlike us and the way of the world. And when we embrace it, we get a special grace that tells us we must share it. That is what it means to be beloved by God.