

“A Father and His Sons”

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

So he told them this parable:

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Prayer.

Our gospel for today is perhaps
one of the most important teachings of

Jesus.
Every Christian is obligated
to learn this parable inside and out
Tradition titled it: "The Parable of the
Prodigal Son"
How unfortunate.
This throws the focus off center.
This is a story of a father and his sons.
A better title might read
"The Parable of the Loving Father."
Ultimately,
this is a story about you and me:
our relationship with each other,
our relationship with God,
and God's relationship with us.
We are the sons and God is the father.
This story calls us away
from where we are:
sinful and smug.
It calls us to where God will us to be:
repentant and joyful.

When Jesus told this parable
it tested the boiling point
of the scribes and pharisees.
If we are to understand it correctly,
our boiling point must be raise, too.
Jesus, in his classic approach
turns the world completely upside down,
causing us to start all over again;
to question our original assumptions,
to create a new order,
that makes sense of his message.
This is necessary for one to encounter
the fullness of God's grace and love.
It celebrates grace,
even at the expense of justice.

Consider the Father.
Dads and moms have
an approach to children that is:
"scene it, done it, been there."
This father probably sees himself
in the words and actions
of his two, completely opposite sons.
The youngest son asks

for his share of the estate
- prematurely, before the father's death -
and, as according to Deuteronomy 21:17
where a double portion goes to the
firstborn,
the father would have given him
one third of all his assets.
The father didn't have to.
He could have made him wait until he
died.
While his son treats him as if he were
dead,
the father knows that holding back
would only make matters worse.
As is often the case,
the older children become,
the more independence
kids want
and take.
The father is certainly reluctant;
but his love keeps him quiet.
"A few days later
the younger son gathered all he had
and traveled to a distant country."
We hear nothing of a quiet father
all the while
his son takes a few days
to convert the property to cash
before he leaves.
Skip ahead with me to verse 20.
"... But while he was still far off,
his father saw him
and was filled with compassion;
he ran
and put his arms around him
and kissed him."
The father kept watch;
Looking down the road
for the first sign,
the very first sign,
of his son's return.
He never gave up.
He never gave in.
He actively waited for his son's return.

The moment he spots his son

HE SPRINGS INTO ACTION!

The father's joy stuns us:
just as it stunned Jesus' audience
of onlookers, disciples, scribes, and
pharisees.
And it continues to surprise us today.
The father's joy
ruins the son's well rehearsed speech.
The father takes from his eldest
two-thirds of the estate;
to cloth his son in the robe reserved
for honored guests,
puts a ring on his finger
and sandals on his feet.
He kills the eldest son's
fatted calf and throws a party!
A party!
The father's joy is simply this:
his son is alive!
his son is found!

Changing gears,
consider for a moment
the younger son.
His story is our story.
It is the story of the lost
the self-centered sinner.
Like us, he seeks
instant gratification.
He seeks the night life bar room crowd.
He seeks to hang out with drop outs.
He seeks the fast lane
and no one is going to stop
his flame out, crash, or burn.
There is no relationship
with his father.
He sees his father
only for what he can get from him.
He abuses his father's goodness.
He takes his old man for granted.
This young buck wants independence
but he doesn't want
the responsibility that goes with it.
It is easy for us to hate him.
Truth is, many of us
have been

or are in
his shoes.

The younger son
knows just enough about the religious law
to make him dangerous:
“Dad! I want my share!”
He converts it all to cash
and travels to a distant country;
just far enough away to be
out from under the father,
but, as we will hear,
not far enough away
for the reports to come back
to his older brother!

Let your mind go wild
with the word “dissolute;”
he spends everything
“in dissolute living.”
(Mercifully, Jesus makes this a
PG parable!).
Famine hits.
Hard times affect everyone.
Sub-prime mortgages are defaulting
and unemployment is on the rise.
When his money runs out
this young man
is driven to take a job!
... a no money job
... a work for your food job
... but a job that will allow him to survive.
The job is feeding pigs!
... the lowest,
most demeaning,
most humiliating,
most revolting job
that one could ever imagine to take.
But he took it,
he did it,
because he'd rather do this than go home.
He was so hungry,
he envied what the pigs were eating.
Hunger tends to wake people up.
It brought this young man to his senses.
“I can do better at home” he thinks.

Hunger drives him home;
not shame,
not love,
flat out hunger.
Going home was his second
and final option.
On his way,
he prepares and rehearses a speech;
a speech that barely
scratches the surface of repentance,
but, instead is meant
to get him a job and to be fed.

Let us consider the elder son.
His story is also our story.
He is smug,
self-righteous,
who is apparently
in no need of repentance.
He suffers from righteous indignation;
so rigidly religious
that he still believes
that years of righteous living
will earn himself
a ticket to heaven.
He is the "Church Lady"
straight from Saturday Night Live,
who, like many of us,
have spent a life-time
in the pews.
Indeed, smugness may be the greatest
of sins.

Notice, however,
the eldest son has little or no relationship
with his father.
He thinks of himself as duty bound;
a slave or servant,
never able to claim
the love or generosity of the father.
Out in the fields,
out in the hot sun,
he is working the land.
He is unaware of his sibling's return;
unaware of the party
his father was throwing

at his own personal expense.
When the day was done
he approached his house
and he hears
before he sees
the party that is taking place
right in his very midst.
He learns the facts from a slave;
a slave, no less!

Anger! Rage! He blows!
He is so filled with spite
he wouldn't even enter.
The father comes out
and pleads with him
on his own front lawn;
a domestic dispute
being aired
for all the neighbors
to see.
(It is nearly as juicy as
the Law and Order section
of the Wayne County Times!)
He throws it right into his father's face:
My fidelity- "For all these years I have
slaved for you ..."
My exaggerations- "I have never
disobeyed your command."
My spite- "Not once have you given me
even a goat
so that I might celebrate with my friends."
(Never mind the fact
that the father spent a lifetime
feeding, clothing, housing, loving his son).

Then, the eldest goes
one step too far:
he means to hurt his father.
"But when this son of yours came back,
who has devoured your property with
prostitutes,
you killed the fatted calf for him!"
Translation: "this son of your"
is not my brother,
and, therefore, you are not my father.
When he gives information about the

specifics
the lurid details derived by independent
sources,
he means to hurt.
His anger is based on the injustice of this
situation.
It is not fair.
Look at what he has done.
Look at what I have done.
Compare the two;
now who deserves the party??!!!

A father's grace seeps through.
He is thankful for his fidelity:
"you are always with me."
He reminds him of where he stands:
"what is mine is yours."
(If my math is correct, 2/3 of the estate,
less the cost of a party, robe, ring, and
sandals.)
He restates his joy
(the point of the story):
my son was dead is alive!
the lost has been found!
Finally, he invites him in:
"come, let us rejoice together!"

Let's tie this all together.
There is a fine line between
forgiveness and enabling.
Let there be no mistake:
the father was not condoning
the sinful son's actions
by throwing him a party.
If, by chance, you are a
law and order type of person,
this story is going to smack
you right in the face
like a bucket of cold water,
just like it did to the
people Jesus told it to.
The essence is that
God's grace comes at the expense of
justice.
Don't get me wrong,
justice is very important

- its vital for a civil society
but even more important than justice
is the grace of God.
We deserve justice.
But God's grace goes one step beyond.
It becomes the conduit
through which the love of God flows
to a parched and dry land.
We deserve justice;
laid out for us by God's law,
given to us by the Constitution.
But we are given grace.
God's grace;
the unexpected,
completely overwhelming,
undeserved forgiveness and love
that is given to you and me.

Fact is:
each of us have a bit of each of these
two sons in us.
We are a sinful people: it is our nature
to destroy justice and live outside the law.
We are also smug people.
It is our nature to look down
with moral contempt upon others
and point out their deficiencies.
But this parable of Jesus
calls us from where we have come
calls us from where we are at
and calls us to go where God wills us to
be.

Let's face it.
If it would have been us doing the story
telling
it would have come out differently.
The father would have given the younger
son
a good whipping and grounded him for
life.
The elder son would have been named
the sole beneficiary in dad's will,
the proud achievement of
an honest, hardworking, son.
The younger son would have never

returned,
and, in our story,
we would have allowed him to die in the
gutter
right where he lived.
But, our ways are not God's ways.
God's ways are the ways of grace.
Grace surpasses law and judgment;
it goes the second mile,
it turns the other cheek,
loves your enemies as yourself,
forgives instead of punishes,
saves instead of condemns.
Grace.
This is the way of God.
Let us follow His way.
The Word of the Lord,
as it has come to me.
Thanks be to God. Amen.