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Luke 15:11-32

THE FATHER WHO LOVES LIKE A MOTHER

“There was a man who had two sons.” Immediately, I can relate to this parable (being a man with two sons). And the younger of them (that would be Cass) said to his father (that would be me), “Drop dead.” That’s right; that’s exactly what the parable really says that the younger son said to his father, even though we hear this way: “Hey, pops, have I told you lately that I love you? So, while we’re having this meaningful moment, can I please have my inheritance early because I just turned 18, got this new Camaro, and I’m outta’ here.”

Today we hear this request as harmless, as a kind of advance on the younger son’s plans to go wild and then come to his senses, and then come home. But in those days, when a child came to ask for his inheritance early, it was viewed as the ultimate act of disrespect. In fact, the ancients would have heard this request as an attack upon the father, a violation of the commandment to honor your father and mother. Why?

Because according to the wisdom teachings concerning inheritance in those days, it was considered a strain on a father’s honor to make yourself dependent on your children. In that apocryphal collection of wisdom teachings called *Ecclesiasticus*, or the *Wisdom of Sirach*, there is advice given on this whole matter of inheritance, and the first hearers of this parable would have known it, and thus found this request to be offensive. “While you have breath in you” says Ben Sira, or Sirach, “don’t do it!” “In the hour of your death, distribute your inheritance” (and not before). Otherwise, you see, the parent child role is reversed, and you might one day have to beg from your own son to live.

What's more, in those days, the eldest son got two thirds of the property, and the younger son (and any other sons) could divide the other third among themselves. There was nothing fair about this, of course, but the point was to protect the family, not the individual. This allowed the elder son to buy out the younger son or sons and maintain the family possessions. There had to be, in those days, a patriarch, a single male head of the family with all the money and power.

So to be a younger son was to be condemned to poverty, or near poverty. But he was never to ask for money early, for as a rabbinic proverb declares, God will not answer the prayers of one "who transfers his property to his children in his lifetime."

So that's what I mean when I say that what the younger son said to his father was really, "drop dead." And of course it goes downhill fast from there. But first a word about this parable and its place in the canon of Western literature--perhaps only the parable of the Good Samaritan is as famous and well-known. It is the longest parable in the Bible, and it appears only in Luke's gospel, and not surprisingly in a section in which Luke is stressing things that are lost and then found--the lost sheep and the coin. Now we have, essentially, a lost son.

Jesus has been getting a lot of criticism for hanging out with sinners, and Luke wants to stress that in heaven there is more rejoicing over the one saved sinner than over 99 virtuous people who have no need to change their hearts. Would Israel reject Jesus, as they had rejected their own prophets in the past? Many scholars equate the older brother in the parable with Israel, resentful of what seems like the cheap grace of the gospel.

But in fact the parable itself does not indicate that accepting the vision of Jesus involves a rejection of God's chosen people. Remember what the father says to the elder son, "Everything that's mine is yours." So the offense of the parable lies deeper, and we need to go deeper to find it.

First of all, this is a parable of sibling rivalry. And that theme runs through the Bible from start to finish, and continues as a literary staple to this day. In the 1984 movie *Amadeus*, the story line is about the intrigue and hatred between the older, less talented Antonio Salieri and the younger and profligate Mozart. In the beautiful film *A River Runs Through It*, there is a hard working

elder brother and the wastrel young son who is the apple of his father and mother's eye.

These stories move us, quite frankly, because they are true. They are the way life is. Family life is complicated and sometimes enormously painful. Sibling rivalry and the perception that certain children were mom or dad's favorite have kept therapists in business forever. Often parents deal with different children differently because they know how different their children are, and often that means more attention to the struggling child, which is viewed by the strong child as neglect.

It is complicated, and often the stuff of Greek tragedy, and in the case of this parable we should make no assumptions about this being a nuclear biological family like *Leave it to Beaver*. It could be that the two sons are not from the same mother, and that the father and the elder son may be closer in age than the elder and younger son. Some people have been bothered by the fact that we don't get to meet the prodigal's mother, and any of his sisters. That's not the way parables work. They are like the old *Rolling Stones* song: "You can't always get what you want . . . but you do get what you need."

We also get no names, addresses, or phone numbers. Parables are about anonymous people, they are always past tense, and they invite the listener to enter into the experience of hearing a story, since this was an oral, not a literate culture, at any level that the listener could imagine. By saying "There was a man who had two sons," Jesus doesn't confuse the issue by identifying the father or the sons, or the town they lived in, or the name of their mother, or what anyone does for a living — none of that. We are dealing with archetypes, and the listener fills in their blanks.

But one thing is certain. This family is wealthy. They have enough land to send the younger son off on his adventure, and still run the farm with slaves and hired hands. And they have a fattened calf. So in every way, the father has "made it" in those days. He has two sons to carry on the family name, and he is rich. And he owns these boys — because that's the way it was in those days. The power of the father was enormous, to give and receive in marriage, to discipline without mercy, think of the movie *the Godfather* and you're close.

Then imagine such a patriarch actually giving a younger son an early inheritance without even asking him how he plans to spend the money. Or telling him that it's a loan and must be paid back, or seeing to it first that the

rest of the family is taken care of – even calling a family conference to explain that Jr. is going on a trip and needs the money and let's all try to understand this need he has to take off and embarrass us all. He'll come to his senses, but in the meantime let's try to understand and be a family here. No, he takes the run the money and runs.

And he does not squander it on a bad investment. He throws it away, he squanders it in loose living. This is the part of the parable we enjoy because it is scandalous, and we can live through it vicariously. The Greek word is *asotos* which has a hint of sexual excess. He goes whoring with this money, and it's not that he's in Las Vegas, where what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. These towns are small, and people talk, and just think how it makes the father look to have financed this party boy with an early inheritance.

A famine arose, and he must go to work for a Gentile feeding pigs, the lowest occupation for a Jew — working for a foreigner feeding an unclean animal. He has fallen from wealth and dignity to wallowing in a pig sty. After waking up with a hangover and smelling of cheap perfume he now literally wakes up in the mud, and in one of the Bible's rare and intriguing psychological moments, “he came to himself.” I'll bet he did.

And this doesn't mean he repented, as Christians understand the term, but merely that he came to his senses. We can't even assume anything more noble on his part than a plan to survive, and to try to get back into the family he has disgraced. He is a kid who seems to be able to talk his way into or out of anything, so let's not assume that the pig sty is a Damascus road experience. It may just be his way of tricking his father again — I'll just ask to be one of the hired hands — knowing his father would never treat him that way.

Now the parable “turns” in the most unexpected and unbelievable way possible. Every parable has a reversal, an unexpected moment when the listener would have been blindsided by a something that doesn't fit, something shocking. And in this parable, it is the behavior of the father, the one who has been shamed.

When we hear that he sees his son while he is “still a long way off” we know exactly why. He has been watching for him. This old man, part of his fortune wasted, his reputation in shambles, is sitting around watching for the return of the son who disgraced him and the family name. Anyone listening to this parable hears this as a man who is still acting like a fool.

And then comes the luminous line, simple, and yet poignant. If you don't feel a chill go up your spine when you hear it, get your spine tingle checked! He sees him, is moved with compassion, and *runs* to meet him. He runs, this old man, on brittle bones — which means he would have hiked up his robes so his old legs would show, a disgraceful act — he runs to meet the son who smells like pigs and is already muttering his little “woe is me” speech but doesn't even get to finish it.

“Father I have sinned, he begins, only to have the father cut him off because he is too full of joy to hear confessions right now. “Bring the robe, the ring, sandals for his feet and kill the fatted calf because my dead son is alive, my lost son is found.”

No probationary period, no lecture that begins, “Do you know how disappointed your mother and I have been?” No cold stare, no “look what the cat dragged in. No, put on your work clothes and get out there and help your brother, and one of these days, when I calm down, we can talk. But right now, get out of my sight. No, he *runs, throws* his arms around the prodigal, and (hold everything) “fell on his neck and kissed him.” That how the Greek puts it. And even indicates an intensification, as in “kissed him over and over.”

The closest thing we have to this language is the story of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume, wipes them with her hair, and kisses them. When Peter complains about her unsightly behavior, Jesus responds, “You didn't offer me a kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet since I arrived.” This is not just a kiss of greeting by the father. This requires that we imagine the father behaving like a woman, a father who acts like a mother.

Now you know, as Paul Harvey would say, “the rest of the story.” The elder brother is in the field, hears music and dancing, and sees servants stumbling around the yard wearing party hats and blowing on those noise makers, chewing on a drumstick and thinks to himself, “Well, isn't this special?” As he wipes the mud off his hands from working his father's land, his little brother, covered with the mud of pigs and carrying who knows what sexually transmitted disease, is having a party. And look, on the spit over the fire, going round and round and round is the fatted calf that nobody ever gave me.

So he prepares his little speech, about how hard he has always worked, and how little he has to show for it, and he stands outside the party, refusing to

go in. The parable ends with him still standing outside, we don't know if he ever goes in, but the father who acts like a mother summed it all up: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

This is oldest story in the world. Sibling rivalry. Amazing grace, so sweet the sound that save a wretch like me — amazing grace, so fine in theory, so difficult in practice, so prone to our own stunted moral imaginations. A great preacher named Ernest Campbell once said in the pulpit of the Riverside church that "what we have today is a loving father gospel in an elder brother church."

Do this for me. Think of your own father, whether he is alive or dead, and just imagine what this world would be like if more strict fathers could be like loving mothers. Fathers sometimes try so hard to be fair to all their children, to treat them all the same, to be the strict disciplinarian, that they never find a way to give each child what that child needs. Every been in a room where one child gets a gift and the others don't?

Have you seen that ad on TV where one little girl asks for a pony, and gets a doll, and her friend asks for a real pony and gets a real pony? The look on the first little girl's face says it all. Life is not fair. Our calculations when it comes to grace fall short. We are not God, and our thoughts are not God's thoughts, even on our best days. Think about it. As this remarkable story ends, there is a prodigal inside the house having a party, who seems to have gotten away with it and yet is restored. And standing outside is an elder brother with all the property, with all the power, and he is angry.

Think of how often, when we have everything, we want more. When we are privileged, it is never enough. When we are strong, we assume that we are being justly rewarded, but the weak deserve their status. But the father in this parable does not discriminate. Just as he ran to meet the prodigal son, he leaves the party and goes out to meet the elder son. This is the traveling father, the opposite of the king who sits on a throne and has his subjects come to him. He *goes out* of the party and addresses his own first-born son tenderly as "my dear child."

In most stories, there is a protagonist and an antagonist, and we expect the righteousness of one character to be purchased at the expense of the other. So in this part of parable, we expect that the younger son will play the

role of protagonist and the elder the antagonist, but again, the father will not choose between them. In fact, both sons are really the antagonists in this story, and the father is protagonist. He cannot be forced to choose between them, even though they both insult him in different ways. He cares nothing for his honor. He cares only for his sons. Try as they might, they cannot escape from him.

The parable closes without a third act, without any resolution, and the audience is left to wonder what will become of these boys. The father will die, then what? Will they play their respective roles and collide over the inheritance again? Will one kill the other, to set things right again and protect their male honor? Or will they remember their father, who loved like a mother, and follow in his footsteps, running out to meet their own sons and daughters and refusing to choose between them.

We all have a choice, between being lost or found, dead or alive. We can accept the gift, or we can keep on trying to figure out who really deserves it. The beloved hymn we are about to sing does not say, “Quid Pro Quo, how sweet the sound, that paid me all I owe, I’m never lost, but my own boss, can see just fine, thank you very much.”

It says, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

Let’s sing it together, and check our spine chiller . . .

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