

## **Reconciliation**

Luke 15:11-32

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### **Luke 15:11-32 (NRSV)**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3So he told them this parable:

11... "There was a man who had two sons. 12The 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. 13A 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. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17But 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! 18I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' 20So 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. 21Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22But 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. 23And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. 25"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29But 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. 30But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 31Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32But 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.'"

Guy had two sons, one a deadbeat disrespecter, the other a dutiful delight. Deadbeat hits rock bottom and comes home, so dad decks him out and throws him a party, while dutiful son got annoyed at the injustice. The Parable of the Prodigal Son, as it is known, invites us its hearers into some familiar and some unfamiliar ground.

I expect most of us have a little deadbeat disrespecter in us, as well as a little dutiful delight. Most of us can identify with the guy who spends wastefully the precious gifts he's been given in life. The guy who only asks forgiveness when he runs on hard times himself. But we also probably know, or think we know, most of us, the righteous guy, the guy who worked hard to please his father, who obeyed, who spent years trying to restore the family name. The guy who gets dismayed when good things happen to bad people. The pleaser guy who felt like second-fiddle in his fathers' eyes. These brothers are indeed also brothers in our consciousness, the sinner and the saint that inhabit each of our self-understandings. Sure, we are familiar with this story, but we are also familiar, before even reading, with its characters, because we know them both.

The less familiar character in the story is the one whose actions and character elude us, the father. Forget unfamiliar, he's almost inaccessible. Younger son says, "gimme my share of the property you will give me." No questions or hesitations. My son asked me for cookies before dinner last night, and I said no, this guy asks for his inheritance up front, the father obliges. After living in dishonor and half-worth, the father sees the wasteful-spending son on his way back, fills up with compassion, and runs to hug and kiss him.

I don't think that we 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, with a culture that loves the comeback kid, with a culture that lives to forgive, can fully comprehend the strangeness of this moment in Jewish culture. The patriarch was a figure of great honor, and many codes and laws governed the preservation of that honor. The younger son violates more codes and laws of honor here than Tiger Woods. He apparently knows no shame, asking for his share of inheritance, leaving his family to "find himself," disgracefully wasting family fortune and property that took generations to build.

This is the kind of thing that the Jews had code to deal with—a *qetsatsah* ceremony, to punish a Jewish boy who loses the family inheritance to Gentiles. If he ever showed up in his village again, according to this code, then the villagers can fill a jug of nuts and corn, break it in front of him as they shout his name, and he'll be cut off from his people. After that, he will be a "cosmic orphan."<sup>1</sup> This was to be an encounter with a broken jug, not a fatted calf.

Adding to the strangeness of this parable is that the dishonored father is also dishonoring himself as the revered patriarch. As Barbara Brown Taylor points out, "Patriarchs did not run. Patriarchs did not leave their places at the heads of their tables when guests were present. Patriarchs did not plead with their children; they told their children what to do. According to the rabbis "three cry out and are not answered: he who has money and lends it without witnesses; he who acquires a master; he who transfers his property to his children in his lifetime."<sup>2</sup> Dishonor in this story runs deep, both the dishonor done to him by his younger son, and the dishonor he brought upon himself for breaking code and giving recklessly.

As we enter into the mystery of the prodigal father, the wasteful code-breaking father, we discover what is perhaps the richness of parabolic revelation here. The father is no earthly father, the father to which the story and Jesus point is so beyond our sense of social standing, or gender household stereotypes, or words. We are forced to move beyond our symbols and descriptions for understanding God. Rembrandt renders the scene in such a way, notes theologian Henri Nouwen, something quite different from letting God pose as the wise old head of a family. It all begins with the father's hands, says Nouwen, two quite different hands. The father's left hand is strong and muscular, while the right hand is refined, soft, tender, and elegant, a mother's hand. The Father is not simply a great patriarch. He is mother as well as father. He holds, and she caresses. He confirms and she consoles. He is, indeed, God, in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood, are fully present, says Nouwen.<sup>3</sup>

Imagery, though insufficient, may help us comprehend this prodigal father's extravagant love, that which is beyond the expectations of any earthly father. It is still another thing, however, to BELIEVE in this portrayal of God, the prodigal father & mother who rejoices over every homecoming and new life. It sounds awfully nice, but do we believe it is true enough to proclaim it in the darkness?

A minister was on his way out of the church building to have an anniversary dinner with his wife. On his way out of the building he encountered a crisis. An elderly woman, with a desperate look on her face, was kneeling on the sidewalk beside her husband, who was lying on his back and clutching his chest. The minister's wife ran inside to call for help, and the minister leaned over to comfort the man, "we have called for some help and they will be here soon..." he began, but the man interrupted him.

"Charlie, forgive me," the man said. "I'm not Charlie," the minister said, "my name is Sam." What Sam did not know until later is that Charlie was the man's son, and years before, the man had disowned Charlie, and the two had not spoken in years. The man looked up at Sam and reached out and touched his hand. "Charlie, please forgive me."

"Just relax," said Sam, "someone will be here soon to take you to the hospital." But the man clutched again in pain, and it became clear that he would not make it to the hospital. With his last gasping energy he

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family," sermon at Fourth Presbyterian Church, April 17, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Doubleday, 1994.

pulled on Sam's arm and begged, "Charlie, please forgive me!" Sam panicked, I am not his son, the relationship is still broken, what right do I have to declare forgiveness?

Then Sam came to himself, and instinctively placed his hand on the man's forehead for a blessing, "I do forgive you. I do forgive you."<sup>4</sup> Those were the last words the man heard in his life, and perhaps the best street preaching ever delivered. For the moment begged for Sam to utter the whole of Christian faith, that in Christ we are given a restoration and a reconciliation that is true and whole, and we are called to walk towards and live into this gift, with every last breath we are given. Eventually he found the courage to remember and to tell the truth.

The apostle Paul calls us today to be ministers of reconciliation, and as a model for our consideration, Luke gives us the bountiful, unconditional, endlessly forgiving, rejoicing love of the prodigal father. Exposed to the light of this divine kind of love, we are asked what we might say, kneeling over a brother or sister on the sidewalk. We are also, ultimately, asked what we might hear,

The apostle Paul encourages us today to be ministers of reconciliation. And Jesus' parable of the Prodigal asks us to consider what we would say, kneeling on the sidewalk, over a brother or sister yearning to go home again. And what we will hear, when we're on that same sidewalk someday, flat on our back, with time for one last breath.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, Westminster John Knox, 2009. p. 125.