

Winfield
3-6-16
Luke 15
“Estranged From the Father”

The story of the Prodigal Son is one of the best known in Christendom. It is probably one of the most preached as well. The human condition of sin, estrangement and forgiveness are there for all to see. The self-centeredness of the younger son just kind of slaps you right across the face. But there is also a lot going on that is not quite so obvious. Especially if one is not familiar with the customs of the times.

For starters, the younger son asking for his share of the inheritance goes way beyond selfishness and chutzpa. To ask for his share of the inheritance while his father was still alive was tantamount to saying “Old man, I wish you were dead!” That level of disrespect would have taken the breath away from those hearing the story. It was just never, ever done. But then for the Father to agree to such an outlandish request was unheard of as well! The audience would have expected the father to put the foolish young man in his place. So the old man must have been off of his rocker to agree to such a thing, yet he did.

Now, dividing the estate between his sons, even just to give the youngest his share, would not have been an easy task. The father couldn't just go down to the bank and make a withdrawal or cash in a CD, to give him the money. No, the estate would have been tied up in land, livestock, seed and the other necessities of life. And the largest share would have been tied up in the land, which provided food and income for the family. The amount of land a family owned indicated the wealth and prestige the family had in the community, so to sell off even the third that would have been the youngest son's share (at that time the eldest son got a double share) would have greatly diminished the family in many ways—yet that is what the father did.

So the youngest son diminished his family's wealth and standing in the community and went off and squandered his new-found wealth in extravagant living. Once he had done that, there was a famine in the land, his “friends” deserted him, and he was in need. So he got a lowly job feeding the pigs. Feeding the pigs! A Jewish boy could not sink much lower, given that pigs were unclean animals and a Jew should not even touch one, lest he be defiled! Yet there he was, and it was there that he came to his senses. He decided to return to his father in disgrace. Not an easy decision to be sure.

His monolog to his father gives us a little insight into just how much the young man had matured. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.” Not a bad speech. He wasn't going back, asking to be forgiven, and throwing himself on the mercy of his family. No, it seems that he realized how much he had cost his family, literally, and was asking to be allowed to pay it back by working as a hired hand. He wanted to make restitution the only way he knew how, trying to make the family whole. So he got up and went to his father.

Luke tells us, “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him and kissed him.” His listeners would have been flabbergasted again! That was not the way an elder of the community would behave. No-- a man of his age and stature would have moved slowly, and with great dignity. The pater familieus would never (a) raise his robes,

which would bare his legs in an undignified manner, or (b) run under any circumstances- with the possible exception of his clothing being on fire or being chased by robbers! A woman might behave in such a manner, and children doubtlessly did it all the time, but never a pillar of the community. And the father would not throw his arms around this shameful boy, or even a well-regarded son for that matter, and hug and kiss him in public. Once again the father was throwing all decorum out the window by such an unseemly public display. It would have been unheard of! But it doesn't end there, does it?

The Father ignores the son's, probably by now well-rehearsed request and will have no part in it. This son is not going to work to restore himself to relationship with the Father, or family, the father restores him to full son-ship right then and there by calling to the servants to "Bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet"! The best robe would have been the fathers, and the ring probably a signet ring that was the seal and legal signature of the family. "Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!"

Such extravagant generosity would have been unheard of, especially in light of what he had already cost the family! Meat was not a usual part of a meal because it was quite expensive to raise, and eaten animals did not produce other animals, food stuffs or income for the family. Killing and eating the fattened calf would have been quite a celebration, and the whole community would be invited to such a gala affair! It would have been akin to a wedding feast!

So here is the father acting with extravagant compassion, love, and generosity toward this son who had behaved selfishly and cost the family so much in terms of wealth and social standing in the community. They were probably the laughing-stock of the town, and here was the father welcoming back the son that was the cause of it all. Unimaginable! The father would have looked like a total fool to those watching such a spectacle, as well as those hearing the tale. Most of those listening would have probably expected the father to prefer that the son remain "dead" to him rather than return, under the circumstances, yet just the opposite has happened.

So the father throws a lavish party at the return of this selfish, good-for-nothing son, and the community joins in. After all, it is a party, and almost any reason to celebrate in those days would have been embraced, no matter how strange it might seem. After all, how often was one offered free food and drink, especially in those days of subsistence living? So the town is whooping it up when the elder son returns home from working in the field, as a dutiful son should. Somehow, in all the excitement, no one had thought to let him know that his younger brother had returned home and there was a party to celebrate it.

So he is understandably surprised to find music and dancing at his house. He calls one of the servants to find out what is going on and gets the unbelievable news. "Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound." So the elder son responds the way that Jesus' listeners would have expected. He was furious! At last someone in this family with some sense. So he refuses to go inside.

Somehow the father hears that his oldest son is outside and refusing to come in to the party, so he goes out to talk to him. No, Luke tells us that the father goes out and begs his son to come inside, but he has having none of it. He tells his father, "Look, I've served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instructions. Yet, you've never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours (not my brother mind you, but this son of yours- you are the cues of all this) returned after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him!”

The indignation of the elder son is easy to understand, isn't it? I mean, I can understand where he is coming from. I can even sympathize to some extent, can't you? The younger brother has essentially robbed the family of wealth and social standing by his wildly self-indulgent actions, while the elder son has stayed and worked hard tending his father's land, supporting the family, and trying to build them back up. He has done what was expected of him, working hard and probably not complaining. Yet here he is standing outside of a party honoring the person who has both demeaned and diminished the family while also making their lives much harder. What is not to understand in his reaction?

Isn't that the way most of us would react under similar circumstances? Isn't he justified in his reaction? Why hasn't his faithfulness and goodness ever been rewarded? How is this party right by any stretch of the imagination? Yet, here we are.

In an unbelievable turn of events, the younger, sinful son is back in the father's good graces, while the dutiful son is standing outside this reunion celebration, causing his father to beg him to be merciful and accept his brother back into the family. At first glance the elder brother may seem to be in the right. Yet, we can understand the father's desire to reunify the family. Aren't we all willing to forgive the indiscretions of our children? It is often hard to be equally fair to our kids, especially in their eyes.

So we can also relate to the father who tries reasoning with his son by telling him, “Son you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.”

The father's welcoming the younger son back into the family is understandable, but it isn't without cost to the elder son. First, the cost of the welcome home party in itself would not be insignificant: the food, the drink and the musicians would not be cheap. Second, the younger son has already frittered away everything that was due him, way before he should have even received it. So when the father tells his son “everything I have is yours” he is literally speaking the truth. What remains is the older son's inheritance, so anything that he spends on the younger son now is at the cost of his eldest son. It is easy to see where both these men are coming from and sympathize with both of their positions.

Let's go back to the beginning of the story for a minute and put it back in context.

What is the setting of this story? All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Ok, so Jesus is justifying his welcoming and eating with sinners to those gathered. In light of his audience that is pretty easy to see. But let's go back even farther.

This story is part three of three stories of lost things being found and returned. First is the lost lamb, where the shepherd leaves the 99 to go out and look for the lost one until it is found. Second was the story of the lost coin. The widow turns out her house looking diligently until the lost coin is recovered, and then calls her neighbors to rejoice with her for finding it. So what is conspicuously absent from this story of the prodigal son?

Who was looking for the lost son? Nobody! Who should have been? The eldest son. The reason the eldest son gets the bulk of the inheritance is because it is his job to keep the family together. So after a while the elder brother should have volunteered to go out and find the younger brother and bring him home, no matter what it cost him. The audience would have understood that.

They would have also understood that the father throwing a gala homecoming party would have been a huge deal. The whole community would be there celebrating. They would have all understood the joy of the father having the family back together, despite what the younger son had done. They would have also understood the turn of events where now it is the righteous elder son that is embarrassing the father by making him come out and beg him to come in to the party in front of the whole community. They would have understood that it is now the elder son who is damaging the family's reputation by his unseemly behavior.

They may have understood how similar both sons were, in that neither one of them seems value the father himself, but only the father's things. So now it is the dutiful elder son that is separating himself from the father, while the sinful younger son has been reunited with him. Oh, the irony! And what is keeping the older brother estranged?

Initially, for the younger son it was his selfishness, his sinfulness, but he was able to overcome that and find the courage to face up to his mistake and return home asking forgiveness. What is separating the elder son from the father? It is his goodness. His righteousness. The elder son admits as much. ["I've served you all these years, and never disobeyed your instructions, and you have never given me anything!"](#) The sinners are now reunited to the father while the righteous through their pride and judgmentalness are now separated from the father.

So the audience is probably on the edge of their proverbial seats waiting to hear how the story is going to end. After all it is the Pharisees and legal experts, the righteous "elder brother" types who Jesus is telling the story to. How is it going to end? Will the elder brother relent and reunify the family or will he stay stuck in his self-righteousness and be estranged from the father? Jesus does not tell us, or them. He just leaves it hanging, letting the self-righteous audience decide for themselves what they would do.

["This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."](#) Yes he does. And so does his Father, who rejoices over one sinner who repents and returns more than over 99 who were always righteous. That is the good news of the gospel. We have a forgiving Father and a true elder brother in Jesus, who goes out and seeks his lost, sinful, younger siblings at great personal cost to himself to reunite them with the Father.

No matter what we have done, or where we have strayed, if we are willing to humble ourselves and return to the father we will be welcomed back. Not grudgingly, as we may deserve, but with a lavish celebration and unmerited grace. For though we had been lost, we have been found, and though we were dead through our sin, we have repented and come back to life.

Praise God for his extravagant grace and forgiveness. May we all be willing to humble ourselves and accept it! Amen.

