

June 17, 2007
You Can Always Go Home
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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." Their grumbling triggered this story.

"There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, 'Father, I want right now what's coming to me.'

"So the father divided the property between them. It wasn't long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

"That brought him to his senses. He said, 'All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I'm going back to my father. I'll say to him, Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.' He got right up and went home to his father.

"When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: 'Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.'

But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here — given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time.

"All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day's work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, 'Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast — barbecued beef! — because he has him home safe and sound.'

"The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son said, 'Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!'

"His father said, 'Son, you don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours — but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!'"

Klye Pruett, a medical doctor in his book FATHERNEED, has some interesting little tidbits that I would like to share on this father's day.

Have you ever thought about how men and women carry a child?

Fathers, when carrying a small child, tend to hold the child face forward, whereas mothers tend to hold the child facing inward or over their shoulder. The father position (called the 'football position' in America) - buttocks on the father's upturned palm, body tucked between father's biceps and side of chest - gives the child the same view of the world the father has. Maybe it is because men have the desire to show their children the world around them?

One mother position, when the child faces inward, gives the child ready access to the mother's body and space; the other, when the child is placed over the shoulder, gives the child a view of the world the mother has just passed through.

What is most fascinating is what both carrying styles have in common. That is the side on which the child is carried: 80 percent of the time both father and mother hold the child on their left side (even when left-handed), next to their heart's side of the chest.

What does that have to do with our story — I'm not sure, but it may be reflected in the various ways we see this well known, well loved parable.

I couldn't tell you how many times I have read this story — preached this story — studied this story; and almost always with the same take on it.

Jesus is preaching to the gathered crowd — a crowd which included the religious leaders as well as his followers.

Jesus tells this story in a rather straight-forward manner. He had been accused by the religious authorities that he was eating with sinners — thus making himself unclean.

- The prodigal son represents those who have been lost and are coming to God.
- The father is of course, God.
- And the jealous ungrateful older son is Israel – who is angry that the Christians are being welcomed into the family.

A pretty simple story.

Maybe, I should just sit down now since we know that God loves us and welcomes us home should we wander — when we wander off.

But, maybe we need to ask ourselves, as we turn the kaleidoscope — what else we might see in this parable.

<<< I am using the image of a kaleidoscope because that is the teaching tool in my children's message at 9:45. >>>

I think the thing that I love the most about parables is that they are not literal stories, and so every time you look at them you can see something different — a great deal depends upon where you are in your life.

One time you read this parable you might be the youngest child:
 having gone off and wandered
 and you hear in this story of a parent — a God — who invites you back home.

Or maybe the next time we read the story we see ourselves as the older sibling — or maybe even as the parent.

And if we do see ourselves in those roles — what is the message?
 What is this parable trying to say to us?

So lets try to take a look at this story from these other perspectives.

Lets look first at the older son.

We see him in the story:
 Angry, bitter, resentful

Why?

The parable tells us that the father had divided his property amongst his two sons. The younger son would have gotten 1/3 and the older son would have gotten a double portion or 2/3rds.

How do I know that? Because in Deuteronomy 21:17 it tells us that the first born son will receive a double portion of all that he (the father) has.

The father would have continued to live with the eldest son — and still had rights to the property.

So why was the eldest son so angry? So resentful?

Maybe he was mad in how the youngest son was treating the father — treating him as if he were dead already — and if not dead, certainly in a disgraceful manner (in the eldest son's eyes)

And those feelings are all in place even before he goes off.

Leaving for the youngest son would have been normal, he would have gone off to the larger villages to seek employment or a new life. What was not expected was what he did with his inheritance.

A young single fellow had the fortune of inheriting \$250,000 from the estate of his deceased uncle who had died with no direct descendants.

The young man went about living the life of his dreams but alas within less than a year the large sum had all been spent and he was broke again. When the young man's father heard that his son was broke, he asked him in astonishment, "What did you do with all that money?"

"Well," the son confessed, "I spent \$60,000 on a new sports car, and \$20,000 taking my girlfriend on a spring break trip to Tahiti, and then I went through \$75,000 on my weekend in Las Vegas, and \$15,000 on a toga party for my frat, and I'm afraid the remaining \$80,000 I just squandered foolishly."

When the younger son returns home, and the father runs to him, surrounding him with hugs and kisses, robes and rings — and then throws a grand party for him — NOW, the older brother is REALLY MAD.

The resentment has spilled over to rage.

And what does the older son say to his dad?

THAT'S NOT FAIR!

What's not fair?

What makes something fair?

If I give my children
 one of them \$50
 and the other \$5
 Is that fair?

Jesus answered the question of fairness in another parable — the story of the workers in the vineyard found in Matthew's gospel.

Should we be resentful at generosity?
 Should we be resentful at compassion?

Resentment, unfortunately, can become like a cancer in us:

Henri Nouwen, one of the great spiritual writers of the twentieth century, commented on the resentment when He wrote,

“Did you ever notice how lost you are when you are resentful? It's a very deep lostness. The younger son gets lost in a much more spectacular way — giving in to his lust and his greed, using women, playing poker, and losing his money. His wrongdoing is very clear-cut. He knows it and everybody else does, too. Because of it he can come back, and he can be forgiven. The problem with resentment is that it is not so clear-cut: It's not spectacular. And it is not overt, and it can be covered by the appearance of a holy life. Resentment is so pernicious because it sits very deep in you, in your heart, in your bones, and in your flesh, and often you don't even know it is there. You think you're so good. But in fact you are lost in a very profound way.”

Maybe this story is challenging you to mend some fences because you are living like the older brother — and resentment is eating at you from the inside out.

Another way that we can look at this story is from the perspective of the father.

What is the father's role in this story.

He willingly gives his son his inheritance.

And you have got to believe that he knew exactly what the son was going to do with it
When the son returns he welcomes him with open arms.

I find fascinating Richard Foster's description of the father in his book *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life*.

What we often call the parable of the prodigal son might be more aptly called "the parable of the powerless almighty father." In the father we see the power that does not dominate, the power that patiently waits. The parable is about God, of course: It is also a parable that was lived out in the life of Jesus. Look at him working patiently with stubborn, rebellious disciples. Look at him at his trial, speaking not a word. Look at him hanging on a wooden throne in total helplessness. These, I submit to you, are acts of spiritual power of the highest order.

In prison, Alexander Solzhenitsyn discovered that, whenever he tried to maintain a measure of power over his own life by acquiring food or clothing, he was at the mercy of his captors. But when he accepted and even embraced his own vulnerability, his jailers had no power over him. In a sense, he had become the powerful, they the powerless.

Is there somebody that we are still trying to dominate — someone that we refuse to wait for — someone that we have judged and written off?

Maybe Jesus is telling us this story to challenge us to love unconditionally — to be there without any demands or expectations.

I know — if you do that you will be stepped all over and taken advantage of.

In Sufism, a mystic tradition of Islam, the story is told of a Sufi who stopped to rest by a flooding riverbed. As the rushing waters rose, the Sufi noticed a scorpion struggling precariously on a low-hanging branch of one of the trees that lined the creek.

Realizing the scorpion, left to its own efforts, would surely drown, the Sufi reached out his hand to the stranded scorpion. But the scorpion stung him. Still the Sufi reached out his hand over and over and the scorpion stung him again and again.

"Sufi," said a passerby, "Don't you realize that if you touch that scorpion it will sting you?"

The Sufi replied as he reached out for the scorpion one more time,

“Ah, so it is, my friend. But just because it is the scorpion’s nature to sting does not mean that I should abandon my nature to save.

I don’t know about you, but I prefer to read this story in the traditional sense — which says that I am always welcome home.

I don’t like to think that I might be the resentful one

Or that I am called to be the one that loves unconditionally.

But in the kaleidoscope of the parable of the prodigal son — all three ways of seeing are there.

May God help you to see that which you need to see!