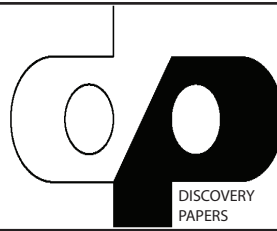


THERE WAS A MAN WHO HAD TWO SONS

SERIES: INVITED: STORIES OF
WELCOME IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE



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Luke 15:11-32
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Steve Zeisler
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Luke 15:11-32

Good morning and welcome to any of you who are visiting. We are glad you have joined us.

My family moved about a year ago. As a result of having moved, we had the privilege of being a part of a summer supper club. It has been a great experience to connect with people and eat a leisurely meal, usually a potluck. The supper club is the opposite of fast food and the grab-a-bite mentality. Also, I learn a new lawn game this summer. I had never before heard of the game Koob. It's a cross between chess and bowling. You and your opponent have wooden Viking soldiers you set out and try to knock down.

The supper club was a reminder that in every time and place, table fellowship has significance. Those that share a meal together connect in ways that you don't in any other circumstance. This morning we'll hear about the parable of the prodigal son in which the center point of the story is a feast: a great celebratory party.

In the times Jesus inhabited—much more than in our own—who you ate with and under what circumstances conferred not only a pleasant gathering but questions of significance, honor, and your standing in society. All of those were at stake when a meal was shared.

The Lord tells a great many stories in which a banquet features prominently. A number of Jesus' teachings revolve around table fellowship. And so it is with this one as well.

We have been studying the Gospel of Luke this summer. Now we are nearing the end of summer and of these studies. This morning we are studying the best-loved and most famous of Jesus' parables.

Luke 15:1-2:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

The problem is not that Jesus talked with sinners, or glanced at sinners, or had an opinion about sinners. The problem is that he ate with sinners—that he had familiar, close knit, open conversation with sinners; that he paid them the respect of having table fellowship with them. This is outrageous to the Pharisees. Jesus responds by telling a series of parables, all of which have a quality of something being lost that is found. He is trending toward telling stories about sons who are lost and then found.

This morning we will look at the longest and greatest of these parables. This story has two sons, both of whom are welcome at the feast.

The story has an open-ended conclusion. We don't know exactly what will happen. There is no complete resolution. There is invitation without resolution. I hope this morning that we will find ourselves somewhere in the story, connecting to some part of it, and realize that we have a meal to share together—a table fellowship with Jesus extended in the meal he gave us to remember his death. Perhaps as a result of what we see, we will find ourselves, grateful and appreciative and worshipful as we partake of this meal together.

We've already heard the story. It would have seemed somewhat familiar even if we hadn't. What's going on? There are three scenes that unfold. The first scene is the story of a descent into ruin. The younger son takes himself to the lowest possible place due to a series of choices he makes. It is the anti-banquet scene. He is left in a place where there is nothing to eat, no companions, no celebration. There is nothing but pigs and there is no food for him. He could not descend to a lower place. Pigs are the worst animal to be associated with and there he is, longing to have the life of a pig.

The second scene is the story of the younger son going back home. We have much to learn there of his ascent from the deep place to a place of welcome. The third scene is the scene of an angry older brother, standing outside, refusing to be apart of the celebration that is happening inside.

We are not going to read the parable again, but I will select a few phrases from each of these scenes so we can experience it again together.

First, in scene one, we begin with this phrase:

“Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me” (Luke 15:12).

The younger son asks his father for the share of property that is coming to him. This is insulting in any time, but it is particularly, staggeringly insulting in the time in which it was spoken, in the culture in which Jesus is telling this story. The younger son is not only asking or pressuring his father for money—“I want money, I want to get on with my life.”—he wants his inheritance. This is another way of saying “Old man why aren’t you dead yet? I have no use for you, I have no use for anything about you. I will get maximum income when you are gone. Why haven’t you bothered to died yet?”

And with that awful public dismissal of his father, the younger son sells the property his father gave him. It becomes obvious what he has done and what he has said and believes about his father, and his father is completely humiliated. Others in the village would have seen the disrespect with which he is treating his father. His father would have to live with the humiliation.

Secondly, we might notice the importance of the word “me” in this young man’s description. “Give me what is coming to me.” His older brother speaks later in a way: “I have served, I have obeyed, I deserve what I deserve.” Each of them has a powerful sense of their own rights, their own requirements, and what is coming to them.

The third thing we see in this scene is the role that money plays—the value that’s put on having this world’s goods and property and the money it can generate when sold; what it means to have money. If there is any place

in the world that needs to come to grips with and some understanding of the power of money to persuade and command and seduce, it is our place in the world.

Paul Taylor has led a group of men in the last few months who meet together and wrestle with what Men’s Ministry might look like at PBC. Concerns that are frequently have to do with the pressure to succeed financially, the possibility of living here successfully, what money says about who you are, and having or not having it. Money is a powerful, powerful temptation and pressure. What is going on in the story of the two sons is part of this valley’s story. People that are too young, with too much money and too much power are blind sided by what happens and lose their way. This parable story might resonate with some of us on that level. May the Lord give us insight as how to end up not eating with the pigs.

The second phrase that we take from the first scene is that the younger son “... took a journey into a far country (Luke 15:13). This is a geographical statement—he left, he went somewhere else—but it is much more than that. What the younger son is doing is completely severing his roots. He had sold whatever property that had belonged to his family that might have come to him. There is no place for him left, he is not coming back as far as he knows. He is leaving behind all the relationships, the values, the boundaries, the people in his life who might have spoken to him and helped him, the people who might have appealed to him for help. The son is leaving his network, the moral universe that shaped him. He is cutting himself off from everything that might have sustained him otherwise. He wants nothing to do with the world he had been in. He left for a far country and he is leaving for good.

The phrase that is ridiculous but commonplace is “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” This is, of course, completely not true and it is not helpful in this case because it implies that you will go back home. You will go to Las Vegas, party, make a fool of yourself, do shameful stuff, but you leave it there and you come back home. But the younger son is never coming back home, as far as he knows. He is going to Vegas to stay. The party is on. He never intends to come back. The things that are taken away in Vegas are never returned. Inhibitions are lost, the moral compass your home country might have given you has been forfeited by him.

Third phrase we take away is:

He squandered his property in reckless living
(Luke 15:13).

Easy money leads to out-of-control behavior which leads to dissipation. It's a familiar pattern. You don't need to be Christian for parents to warn children what is out in the world and what can happen. It's true in every culture and in every time in history that too much, too soon, without boundaries is dangerous. In our story this morning, it leads to reckless living. You can imagine this man arriving in the far country with a lot of money and he just finds himself shocked. I now have so many friends. I used to have a hard time making friends, but here everybody is my friend. It's wonderful. I'm much smarter and my ideas are taken more seriously here in the far country, and girls like me. Who knew! I'm shocked at how attractive suddenly I've become. People laugh at my jokes; no one at home laughed at my jokes. It's a world built on soap bubbles, facades, false friends, and reckless living. The party life goes on until it ends. The son squandered his property with reckless living.

The fourth phrase in scene number one is: "a severe famine arose in that country." The famine will always come. The crisis will arrive—it is inevitable. The idea of reckless living, the party world, the imagined experience that everything is always and relentlessly in my favor ends. The crisis comes—the famine—and the son finds himself in a desperate place. Verse 16 tellingly says that none of his former friends would give him anything. He lost it all.

This is the anti-banquet in the field. The son is trying to feed the pigs what he cannot eat himself. All alone, desperate, starving. It is the lowest possible place

The Pharisees who grumbled about Jesus eating with sinners would have liked this story up to this point. If you do foolish, terrible, and immoral things, you ought to pay a price. These acts ought to lead you into a dark place; they should put you in a pit. Sinners should be put in a pit. That makes sense.

The son savaged his father. He behaved shamefully. He lost everything.

Compared to others' tales of self-inflicted destruction, this man can't even say he had a tough upbringing. Sometimes the story of a person who ruins his own life is the story of being treated so badly in childhood; of so many things gone wrong; of so much hardship, abuse, and rejection. You live out the tale of your tragic early life, and tragedy follows.

This son didn't have a tragic early life. He was loved by his father. He had a home, he was winsome, and he still decided to wreck everything. He ended up in a deep hole, and that is what should happen. Except the story doesn't end there, and this is where it begins to get remarkable, breathtaking, and unbelievable.

He came to himself (Luke 15:17).

I am trying to revive the tradition of including corny jokes in sermons at PBC, so this is where it gets arbitrarily inserted into the sermon.

So a preacher is telling this (same) story, and he gets to this phrase "He came to himself" and he says that the young man is desperate and starving and has to sell his hat for food. He was still starving so he has to sell his shoes, and then he has to sell his jacket. He is still starving so he finally sells his shirt. Then he came to himself. Get it? His shirt is gone. Hissing is good. That makes sense!

The question for us is what does the phrase "he came to himself" mean?

Scholars debate as to whether or not this young man actually repented in his woeful circumstance. Was his heart broken before God or was he thinking "I'm in a mess and I need to get out of it." I think the situation is ambiguous. I don't think we can say for sure what is going on. I don't think the young man knows for himself. He makes the statement that I have sinned before heaven and before my father. If he said that on his own terms, it would be more meaningful. The problem is it is a speech he is writing. I am going to go tell my father these things because there is still something I want from this old man.

Does the son mean it? Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't. I think when all is lost for him, he combines the recollection of the servants in his father's home, the desperation of his own circumstance, calculation, and remorse and tries to figure out what to do next.

There is still no banquet in sight for him. He never hopes to ever regain a place of honor. He is hoping only to go to a place where he can earn enough so he won't starve.

Then the story changes and the light begins to flood in and the music get scary and unfamiliar.

The second phrase in scene two:

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him (Luke 15:20a).

The implication—while he is still a long way off—is that his father was looking for him for however long it took, however many months or years it took for him to make a mess of his life. We are supposed to conclude that the father has spent every day looking down the road, hoping that his son would come back. There is no telegram, there is no sense that today is the day. Every day the father has been hoping for—longing for—the return of his lost son.

Why? Why didn't the father act differently we might ask? Why didn't he refuse to give the inheritance to the son? Why did he allow things to go so far? Why didn't he intervene sooner? Why didn't he go to the far country and bring back his son? Why didn't he manipulate his son do something? Why did he wait, with his own heart breaking, for his son to come back?

Part of the mystery is the mystery of what love is. Love really exists, really thrives, when it is chosen absent of manipulation, absent of force, absent of a twisted arm, or insistence of the beloved. I think what this says is about God's vulnerability—and the father is certainly the Lord God in this story. The father is waiting. The father has been humiliated by his son. His heart is breaking still, he refuses to ravish or manipulate the son. He is waiting for the son to come home. We are seeing the God that the Pharisees know nothing about in this story. And it gets worse, or more remarkable, depending on your perspective.

The third phrase:

(His father) ran and embraced him and kissed him (Luke 15:20b)

Everything about that short sentence is humiliating to the father. A stately older man in the culture of his time would never run. Men wore long robes. They walked slowly. The father would never recklessly run. He did it in public. He is calling attention to himself. The father embraces his son. He is kissing him and crying. These actions further lower the father's status in the eyes of everyone around him. It is further spending of himself for the sake of his son. It is the exact counterpoint to how his son treated him. The son who said I want you dead. Here is the father who is crying his eyes out because his son is still alive. The tenderness of it, the unexpectedness of it. The ring, the robe, the party tent, the joy are completely unexpected and it shocks us. Why so much? If it is true—if God longs for his children to come to him this way—what does it suggest about people like us, people who disrespect our father all the time just by our callousness?

The final phrase in scene two:

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found (Luke 15:24a)

The perspective of Jesus is that those who are in broken relationship with him are not failures or rejects; they are not the unwanted or the ruined, but they are the lost. Something that is valuable is lost as far as God is concerned. They are lost and they are being looked for. They are not rejects. They are immensely important to him and he longs to find who is lost. Dead now alive, lost and now found.

Before we go on to the third scene with the older brother, I want to mention that what we've been reading is a story, not a systematic theology. This story does not tell us everything about the rescue of sinners. There is no explicit description of a sacrifice offered, for instance. There is no cross. There is no exact representation of the fullness of the cross; however, we see echoes of the cross in the humiliation and the personal lowering of the father—the humiliation of Jesus on the cross and God giving up everything to save us, but there isn't an explicit reference to it. We don't know everything there

is to know about the way God brings home his children because of this story. It's a story! It is supposed to connect viscerally with us. It's supposed to seize our imagination and help us believe things even if we don't understand them. So we shouldn't ask this story to do what it was never intended to do and cannot do, because it is a parable—it is a story.

We see the son at the deepest point of his life and we see some of his options. One option is to pull himself up by his bootstraps, but that will never work. Another option is to give way to self-hatred and despair, and to stay in the company of the pigs for the remainder of his life. We can imagine the son trying to make a deal with someone. We can see him trying to receive advantages from outsiders. We can see the options presented to someone who has gone as deeply as he has. But there is no other option like this: what if I am loved even here? What if I have a father who is going to seek the lost one, who is looking down the road for me? What if it is true that I don't have to live with self-effort and despair? What if I am loved? We are supposed to have a visceral response to this story. It is supposed to capture our gut, if you will.

The only emotional response to this in the story is from the older brother. The only one who reacts to what he is seeing is the older brother, who is really upset. Instead of being amazed, he is furious.

But he was angry and refused to go in (Luke 15:28).

The older brother hears a party. His younger brother is being welcomed home. There is no reluctance to this; there is overflow and joy. The older brother comes and is upset. He refuses to go in. Once again his father is going to humiliate himself on behalf of one of his sons. His father will again go out into public and implore his son to come in. A father was the ruler of his home. He would command his son to come in. He wouldn't act with an egregious humiliation and say, "Please son, come in. Please understand what is happening. Please welcome your brother." The older brother won't call his younger brother by his name. Instead, he tells his father that it's your son who has gone off to squander his life. This angry son further humiliates his father, and we sense jealousy. The younger brother has been off with prostitutes, and he has been here with full rectitude doing everything he ought to do, without fail.

You can imagine the older brother thinking "I wish I would have been able to sin as freely as my brother."

I knew a man many years ago, during a time in which divorce in the church was more of a negative than it is now. This man was on a board of directors for an organization. The board was considering putting someone into leadership in the organization who had had a marriage that failed many years ago, but had remarried and was honoring God in his new family relationship. This man I knew was going to vote as to whether or not this person should be a part of the organization's leadership. He said no. He said it's unthinkable, divorce is impossible, and anyone who has failed in that way is unfit for Christian leadership. I got to know this guy well enough to know that he is one of the most unhappily married men I had ever known. His marriage was painful, it was miserable, and it was a daily struggle to stay in. One of the reasons that he did not want this other person to be involved in the organization was that he wanted to be out of his marriage.

He didn't know how to fix his marriage or where to go. All he knew was how to feel resentment about it. There's some of that same feeling in the older brother in our story. He's not a failure, but rather his failure is exposing his heart more than he wants. He is jealous of the brother who got to live out this wild existence.

The second phrase in this final scene:

'These many years I have served you and never disobeyed your command' (Luke 15:29a).

It's an exalted sense of what he has done for someone else. The word serve can mean slave—I have slaved for you, father; I have never disobeyed you, father, I am morally pure. I have extended myself to the outermost. I am misused, misunderstood, and under appreciated. My standing is immense but no one sees it but me. There is a whiny, tiny emotional tightness around this guy that he doesn't understand. He is lying to himself and he cannot see it. The emotional deceit is tremendous. His anger is all that he has to operate with.

The father's answer is short but powerful: Son if you wanted anything you would have it. Everything I have is yours. You are always with me. You already have what you are trying to earn. There is nothing that would bring joy or honor or beauty to your life if you wanted it that I would withhold from you; all that I have is yours. All this anger and self-centered behavior doesn't accomplish anything because you already have what you are trying to win. What you are trying to earn? So the story ends there. Did he come in or did he not? We don't know.

We surely don't know if the younger son truly learned a lesson either. Maybe after he has been restored he will once again charge off in some selfish behavior. We don't know how these sons turn out; the story just ends. It therefore asks the question about us: What about us? Will we come in? Will we have table fellowship with Jesus? Will we receive what he is offering us?

The story of the prodigal son is one of the most famous, well-known, most influential, most documented texts that has ever been written. If you were a Bible scholar and interested in the great themes and structures of the Bible, you would say that this is another story of the Father who had two sons. It's another Cain and Abel story; it is the Ishmael and Isaac story again; it's the Jacob and Esau story again. The father-son conflict. It's the themes of the Bible again.

If you were a literary sort, you might say this is one of the greatest stories—not just Bible stories—ever written. It includes all the things that make us human: generational conflict, sibling conflict, difficulty and resolution, and so on.

If you were a psychologist, you might say here is a study of attraction disorders. Why do these two sons hate their father so much? What makes them so furious at him? He never did anything to them. Maybe we see some discovery of psychological issues.

The people who want to see Jesus—people like us who want our hearts changed by what's here—will find our gaze steady on the father. What an extraordinary person who gives up everything to have back in his embrace someone who has mistreated him. Both sons are unworthy and unloving yet he loves them. His suffering and humiliation...his patient waiting, looking down the road for the one who has yet not returned. The father overcomes the younger son's degradation, anger, and despair, and he insists on a celebration. The far country is not too far away. The hard heart and self-brewed bitterness of the older son are not too much for him. Relentlessly he pursues his sons whether or not they are sinner or Pharisee; he will have them at his table.

The Pharisees grumbled that Jesus ate with sinners, but he always has. There is no one else to eat with. He names them not sinners but sons and daughters.

Let us hear his voice: Let us eat and celebrate 'for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found' (Luke 15:24).