

**Tell Me the Stories of Jesus:**

**The Prodigal Spirit**

**Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

**July 7, 2019**

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*“And the father, while the son was still far off, saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him.”*

- Luke 15:20

**Prayer of Preparation**

O Lord, from the hour we first believed to the hour at hand may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable unto you. Amen.

**Message**

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, once stated that “the beauty of a really good parable – in the case of the prodigal son, perhaps the most beloved parable of all time – is that it meets generations of listeners wherever they are: whether in first century Palestine, or in fourth-century Rome, or in sixteenth century Germany, or in twenty-first century Franklin.”<sup>1</sup>

The reason? We all come from weird families, if not dysfunctional families.

There is also the reason that most of us, at least once in our lives, has probably thought about running away from home. Anyone here try to run away from home? I know I did! I told my mom when I was seven: “I am getting out of Dodge. I have had it! I have my clothes packed.” My mom looked at me and said, “Well, all right, you can leave this family the way you came into this family: Take off your clothes and you will wear your birthday suit! That’s how you came in and that’s how you will go out!” Needless to say, I didn’t get far!

But there is also a third reason why this story is important, and that has to do with whether or you not you happen to have a fellow sibling: you know how difficult it can be, especially when there are only two of you, so that the “good

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family” (Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago on March 18, 2007).

child/bad child thing” hovers over you no matter which one you happen to be at any given moment.

For all these reasons and more, the parable of the prodigal son stays young no matter how old it is, giving us all kinds of ways to make the story our own. And because it is about family, it also may hit closer to home.

The problem with a really good parable like this one, though, is that it can become limp from too much handling. Like a teddy bear without stuffing, it just doesn't stand up straight anymore or stay put, with the head on one side and the body on the other. That's how you know you don't have a parable anymore: it is just limp. There is no punch to it.

After all, there is really nothing remarkable about a young man who decides to leave a home where he will always be known as the “baby brother.” There is also really nothing remarkable about a young man going out and making a fortune. What could be more American? The younger son does what many young people do: he leaves home! What is the big deal?

Yes, he hurt his father in the process by requesting his inheritance, which was like telling his father that he might as well be dead (15:12), but the father probably understands, since the father probably did the same thing when he was young. The difference, of course, is that the father made good and the younger son did not.<sup>2</sup>

## **Prodigal**

Indeed, *not making good* is *why* we typically call the younger son “prodigal,” or wayward. That is really not what prodigal means, though. To be prodigal means that you spend and spend until you have nothing left; it actually means extravagant recklessness.<sup>3</sup>

It is why there is really more than one prodigal in this story. In fact, we may want to consider how extravagantly reckless the father's love truly is. For what is more prodigal, more reckless, than the father's preemptive forgiveness, than the father's all-embracing love toward *both* his sons?

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York, NY: Dutton Press, 2008), xv.

Typically, when we read this story, we read it through the lens of American Protestantism, which means that when we read this story, we read it as a story of *individual* repentance: it becomes a story about how I as an individual can no longer find my way. I am lost. And then one day, when I come to my senses, when “I” decide to go back home. I say I am sorry. I then return home, receive a banquet in my honor, and my family’s love exceeds all human reason.<sup>4</sup> Wal-lah!

There is nothing wrong with this understanding. As individuals, we do lose our way; it is part of the human journey, no matter the age!

Peggy and I got lost hiking last week in Brown County. Take wrong turn and oops! We are not in Brown County State Park in anymore!

Even with GPS, we can get lost! In fact, I heard on National Public Radio the other day that we all are getting worse at finding our way because of GPS! That is, we all are losing a sense of direction – both internally and externally.<sup>5</sup> Anyway, we all get lost.

### **Jesus’ World**

Again, there is nothing wrong with understanding the parable of the prodigal son this way. It is a perfectly good story about a person who comes to his senses, confesses his wrongdoing, and returns home (Luke 15:17). The problem is that if we really want to understand the punch of this story, it is worth pondering what Jesus is really saying, for Jesus’ audience would have heard a radically different message than just individual repentance.<sup>6</sup>

First of all, Jesus lives in a very rural culture, and chances are the people listening to Jesus are from small farms. They know about the importance of family ancestry and family deeds and trusts. After all, there are no courthouses where people could file claims or work on property rights. That was all kept in the family. It is why breaking faith with the family could literally mean losing the family farm.

Second, having good neighbors in Jesus’ day was also very important: from birth to death, families depended on each other; from trading chickens to building barns, families worked side-by-side, and if things worked out, children would

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family.”

<sup>5</sup> See IA Program, “The Curious Way We Find (and Lose) Our Way” on National Public Radio (May 1, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family.”

marry other children from other families, thus strengthening family and community bonds.

It is why it is worth remembering that in this world the whole concept of the “individual” has little to no meaning apart from family, clan, or community. Identity is not singular, but plural. For example, in some parts of southern Indiana, even today, we still refer to persons more in terms of family. That is, we might say things like, “That old Edith is a Meinert.” And immediately, we know what that means: we think Meinert clan.

And then we might go on to say things like, “She is the oldest Meinert girl; she was all set to marry that Hoehn boy, until she it into her head to go to the big city. Came back last month with two little ‘uns who don’t look like anybody. Broke the Hoehn’s family heart. The Meinert’s too. Those families used to be so tight. Not no more.”

Family, community, before individual. The important thing is that we don’t give the family a bad name. Make sense?

### **Parable Insights**

So how do we understand what Jesus is saying?

Well, in Jesus’ day, we need to remember that the head of the family is typically a strong male, patriarch-type. And we need to remember that there is an elaborate code for keeping honor in the family. For instance, one of the rules is that the head of family does not run; another rule is that the head of a family does not leave his place at the head of the table. Yet another thing is that the head of the family does not plead with the children. rather, the head of the family tells the children what to do. And so forth.

In other words, told with *this* kind of cultural background in mind, this parable suddenly sounds like a parable about a dysfunctional family, for what we begin to see is not a strong patriarch but a weak father, with an absentee wife, with two sons he cannot control.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, told in *this* way and the parable takes on a whole new cast, for it is really about a father who is willing to sacrifice his honor to keep his family together. That is, it is really about the reunion of a family, not simply the repentance of one person. It is really about the high cost of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

reconciliation, in which “rightness” goes down to the dust, *so that* those who are considered dead to each other may come together again and live in peace, given new life.<sup>8</sup> It is really a story about resurrection!

If this sounds complicated, it is. Dysfunctional families usually are. For the younger son *is* a jerk. Make no mistake. He brings shame upon the whole family and community by requesting his inheritance. He wishes his mother and father as good as dead by taking the money, thinking only about himself, or about what he wants. For him, it is about being his own person, not being part of the family or the community. His actions bring dishonor to *everyone*.

Indeed, how do people in the village respond to this family? Do the people in the village shun them, feel sorry for them? It is a difficult call.

Of course, while this is going on, the younger son is squandering everything on wild living, losing it all, and not just losing it all but losing it all to *Gentiles* – i.e., to Roman citizens, to pagan pig-owners, complete strangers to the God of Abraham and Sarah.

This young man might as well have used his birth certificate to light up an Italian cigar, for what he was doing was so reprehensible that if he were to ever show up again, the townspeople could very much say he was no longer part of community, as he cut himself off from his own people.<sup>9</sup> It is why the prodigal’s only hope at this point is to confess to his father what he has done, praying that the people in town don’t get a hold of him (Luke 15:18-19).

In other words, this young man is returning home not to sing Kum-bah-Ya with his father. No, he is returning home because he is hungry, he is out of money, and he needs a job, and maybe, just maybe, if he is lucky, his father will have him back to work as a hired-hand on what is left of the family farm. He can only hope.

But what about the father? Apparently, from what we can tell, while the boy is “still far off,” someone tips off the father that his son is coming. The father sees him and is filled with compassion (Luke 15:20). And the father then does what grown and honorable men at that time are NOT to do: he runs out to meet this son (Luke 15:21).

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<sup>8</sup> See Kenneth Bailey, “The Pursuing Father,” *Christianity Today* (October 26, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

I believe it was Aristotle who once said that “Great men never run in public.” Well, here’s a father who runs in public! Part out of affection, part out of protection. The father can protect his son from the townspeople by getting there first; and he can save his relationship with his son and his family’s relationship with the whole village all at once if he can there before the others.<sup>10</sup>

The tricky part is that this act of reunion will cost the father his honor, his reputation, maybe even his family; this is NOT how patriarchs are to act. But it is a price he is willing to pay.

In fact, the father is also willing to take another step: to restore his honor in the community, he is willing to throw a party, and not just any party, but a banquet, with a fatted calf, a ring, sandals, and best robe. All the works. This is feast of reconciliation for anyone who is willing to come.

And just like that the father throws a party! The young son is found and restored, and the community comes together, not in isolation, but together, being reunited in relationship. If there was ever a man who deserves a happy ending, it is this father. He has sacrificed it all for his son, his family, and his community.

### **One More Son**

But remember I told you earlier that this story is about a dysfunctional family. Guess who has not come to dinner? The elder son! He refuses to come to the party after hearing all music (Luke 15:25).

After all, no one asked him if he wanted to be reconciled with his good-for-nothing brother. No one asked him about how he felt about spending the family inheritance. He has obeyed his father and done everything right, and he isn’t about to sit down *at the same table with his self-centered, pig-loving brother* (Luke 15:26). Not gonna’ happen!

But here, the elder son also has a problem: in his fit of anger, the elder son also insults his father, by refusing to accept the father’s offer of reconciliation. The older son is just as pig-headed as the younger son.

And it is wearing on the father! In fact, the father is worn out, going back and forth between such warring and spoiled children. He is worn out with how

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

little it means to them to belong to each other, and with how much more interested they are in being right than they are in being reconciled.

And it is a perennial problem, isn't it, not just in families, but in churches and nations? We want peace, but we don't want to make the changes that make for it. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of Great Britain once shared with regards to the Israeli and Palestinian conflict: "Having peace always involves a profound crisis in identity: that is, you cannot have peace and reconciliation and stay the way you are. You sometimes have to make huge concessions, sacrificing your ego, giving up pride and respect, and even foregoing being right."<sup>11</sup>

It's all about priorities: are you more concerned with looking good, or, like this father, are you wanting to be reunited with those you love? What matters? The prodigal spirit of a father who goes out of his way to bring together what is separate, or an older son who stands outside and argues?

### **Closing Invitation**

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, there is a party going on. There is music and dancing. There is plenty to eat. The house is full. You can see it and hear it.

The problem is that the father, who has been standing outside, is not going to make us come inside. Rather, he is going to stand there and wait for us, for as long as it takes.

For what is left of the father's honor is *now in our hands*: we can go to the party and celebrate, or we can stay out and complain about who's at the party and at the table. After all, we are free to attend, so as long we don't insist on staying the way we are, for this is a party on behalf of all those who have been lost and are now found. It is a party for all who have been reconciled, and it is thrown for anyone who will come. The question now is, will you?

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<sup>11</sup> See Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*.