

Luke 15:1-3 (NRSV)

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. [2] And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

[3] So he told them this parable:

Luke 15:11-32 (NRSV)

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. [12] The 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. [13] A 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. [14] When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. [15] So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. [16] He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. [17] But 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! [18] I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; [19] I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." ' [20] So 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. [21] Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' [22] But 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. [23] And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; [24] for 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. [26] He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. [27] He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' [28] Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father

came out and began to plead with him. [29] But 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. [30] But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' [31] Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. [32] But 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.' "

THE FATTED CALF

The class heard the parable of the Prodigal Son for the first time. The Sunday school teacher talked about the story in detail and then asked, "Who was sorry to see the prodigal son return?"

Her question was greeted with silence and blank stares. The teacher was frustrated that the class had not learned even this simple fact so she tried again. With a hint of irritation in her voice she said, "Come on now. Weren't you listening? Who was sorry to see the youngest son come home?"

Finally, one young boy began to wave his hand wildly. "I know. I know." When the teacher acknowledged her excited young student, he said, "I know who was sorry to see the young son come home. It was the fatted calf!"

How you interpret a story depends upon whom you identify with in that story. In this case the little boy identified with the fatted calf!

A TROJAN HORSE

We've all heard the story of the preacher who dreamed that he was preaching, and when he woke up, he was. The story of the prodigal son is so old, so familiar we feel like we can preach it in our sleep. It's like the old joke or story that makes it into your email for the hundredth time.

Be sure to wake me when I quit preaching!

But, I believe this familiar parable is much more challenging than we often make it. Clarence Jordan said that a parable is like Trojan horse. It looks harmless. You let it in. And then BAM! It's got you.

So my job is to help us hear the surprise in this familiar story, to (as chef Emeril might put it) "kick it up a notch" by spicing it up a bit.

Let's do that by earnestly trying to identify with one character in the story. I'm not talking about the fatted calf. I'm talking about the older brother. In my opinion, the older brother is like the Rodney Dangerfield of biblical characters. He doesn't get any respect. But, maybe he should.

OLDER BROTHERS AND SISTERS

When we studied this parable at our Bible studies this past week, a few of us found that we had a great deal of sympathy for the older brother, especially those of us who are ourselves older brothers or sisters. We wanted to know. Why did the father throw such an elaborate party for this wayward child while the more faithful son was all but ignored?

We older brothers and sisters knew what that felt like. We had, in a way, lived this story. We always had to be the faithful one, the responsible one while the "kid" got everything he wanted. It wasn't fair. The fatted calf wasn't the only one sorry to see the prodigal son return home. The older brother was sorry too. In fact he was angry, and maybe if we had been in his shoes we would have been angry too.

We learn from the context that Jesus told this parable against the Scribes and the Pharisees. They were the consummate older brothers. They were the responsible ones. They were the ones who were serious about religion and morality.

Don't make the Scribes and Pharisees into one dimensional cartoon characters. They were dedicated to righteous living. They wanted more than anything else to obey God's law.

And what's wrong with that? Nothing is wrong with that. I think their cause was a noble one. Our society would be a lot better off if we had more people

like the Scribes and Pharisees. They only said what many of us religious people say even today.

We say things like, “Birds of a feather flock together. One rotten apple spoils the barrel. You are known by the company you keep. Three strikes and you’re out.”

We older brothers and sisters believe in grace, but also believe in responsibility. You can’t teach responsibility when you coddle younger brothers who waste the family fortune.

THE YOUNGER SON

Look at the facts. The younger brother is selfish. He doesn’t care about anything but his own pleasure. He can’t wait for the old man to die so he asks for his part of the inheritance right now. Nothing is more disgusting to me than someone who insists on talking about what they hope to inherit from someone when they die. But, this little whippersnapper goes even farther. He’s not willing to wait for the bell to toll for his father.

He says, “Look dad, you’re living way too long, and I can’t wait any longer. If you’re not going to die on time, the least you can do is give me my share of the inheritance right now. I have places to go and people to see.”

Do you know what I would do if my son told me that? We don’t have enough time to answer that question, but it would not be pretty. And one thing I sure wouldn’t do is give him the money. That would be crazy. It would be the equivalent of giving your teen age son whiskey and car keys and saying, “Have a good time.”

It’s just not a smart thing to do.

But, that’s what the father in our parable does. He divides up the inheritance among his two sons. You don’t have to be a prophet to predict what happens next. The impulsive young man cashes in his inheritance and heads for Vegas. And there in “sin city” he spends the hard earned family fortune on wine, women and song.

Of course, even the family fortune doesn't last long at the roulette wheel, so his luck soon runs out, and the young son is left with no way to pay the bills.

Once again, I'm an older brother, and I have no sympathy. We've all heard stories of these people who win big with the lottery. But, because they don't know how to control themselves or manage their money within a few years they are broke again.

What's the old saying? "A fool and his money are soon parted." Another old saying seems apropos at this point, "You made your bed now lie in it!"

And so the young son is trapped in the far country with no way to pay the bills. In fact he doesn't even have enough money to grab a burger at McDonalds. His only recourse is to hire himself out to a farmer who raises pigs. What an appropriate punishment.

If you're going to live like a pig, guess where you're going to end up?

The pigsty.

THE "CONVERSION"

But, then the younger brother has a revelation. He comes to his senses.

"I can go home to daddy, and he can make it all better again. He's a soft touch. He even pays his servants too much." I can just hear the older brother's response to this sudden conversion, "Oh sure he's sorry. He's sorry that the money's running out, and now he's coming home to get more."

The word prodigal means extravagant and wasteful, and it has been my experience that the prodigal son or daughter tends to stay the same no matter how many disastrous trips they make to the far country. They come home when the money runs out, but it won't be long before they have cooked up another scheme, and it usually involves an "investment" of your hard earned money.

Every family has at least one prodigal. They're always in trouble, but redemption is just around the corner. Maybe you believe it the first few

times. But, eventually you learn your lesson. No more money for Uncle Fast Buck. He's only out to help himself.

CHEAP GRACE

We don't know what happened after the prodigal son returned home. Sometimes I think that it might make an interesting Bible study to have people write their own ending to the story. Like most parables the story is a bit open ended, and we like closure in our stories. What happens next to the younger son? Did he change his ways and become more responsible?

Maybe he did. But, if I were writing the story, I would make it a tragedy. I would say that he got more money out of his father and headed once again for the far country. You see, we older brothers are good at facing facts. We are cynical because we have been down this road to the far country before. Somebody needs to be responsible enough to run the farm, and usually that job falls to us.

I once read an article entitled, "The Most Abused Theological Concept." Can you guess what the most abused theological concept is? It is grace.

To illustrate his point the author pointed out how the hymn, "Amazing Grace" has become a kind of theme song of the popular culture. He wrote, "Vocalists whose repertoire is more cabaret than catholic have become famous for their renditions of the hymn between numbers celebrating the joys of fornication."

Call me an old party pooper if you want. You can even call me a Pharisee. But, I think the older brother had a point. The father or mother who lets a child have everything or do anything is not showing love. They are guilty of neglect. Sometimes love means saying no.

So what do we do with this parable? It offended the religious leaders long ago, and if we hear it aright, it should offend us as well.

The doctrine of grace sometimes seems to condone sin. In fact, that was the message that some in the early church believed. They thought, "God will forgive us. He's in the forgiving business. The more we sin the more grace

will abound.” The apostle Paul was mortified by such an abuse of the gospel. To that false doctrine he said, “God forbid!” (Romans 6:15)

One commentator wrote, “The concept of grace has become in time something akin the insanity plea in criminal trials, a way of breaking the appropriate sequence of crime and punishment. Indeed, just as the persuasiveness of the insanity defense tends to be in direct proportion to the heinousness of the crime, the reliance on grace tends to be in direct proportion to the seriousness of the sin.”

Throughout history there have been those who have equated grace with an easy attitude toward sin. In Martin Luther’s day there were those who “piously” participated in adultery in order to prove their total reliance on grace. We have seen that same kind of behavior in some prominent religious figures in our time as well.

But, with Paul we can safely say, “God forbid!” This is not the gospel of grace. Grace cannot be used as a cover for irresponsibility. And a close examination of our story for today shows that the Bible doesn’t teach this either.

THE LOVE OF A FATHER

Grace is not the calculated love doled out to those who deserve it. Grace is the love of a father, the love that is with us no matter how bad we mess up. The father in our story for today loves both his sons despite what they do.

The story doesn’t say this directly, but we can surmise from the details given that this father must have agonized about his son’s fate as he resided in the far country. Every day that his son was gone the father traveled far down the road to the far country, hoping that his son would have a change of heart and come home. And he prayed to God that his son had not died a victim of his own desires.

And on that day that the son did come home the father came running to him while he was still a long ways off. The father’s heart was broken by his son’s waywardness, but his love was intact.

And so, when this son whom they had given up for dead comes home, what does he do? He throws a party. He says, “What a relief. The one that I thought was dead is alive. It’s a miracle!”

Parents know that kind of love. It doesn’t mean that we excuse everything that our children do. We know their shortcomings. We know them all too well. But, we always wait for them to come home. We are excited to see them, and we love them.

God’s love, God’s grace is the love of a father or mother who waits expectantly for a wayward child to come home. William Muehl wrote, “The function of redemptive love, both God’s and of [human beings], is not to make the sinner feel better about the past. It is to give the sinner back his future.”

You’ve heard it many times before, but it is still true. God hates the sin, but God loves the sinner. And so our heavenly Father gives us back our future and forgets the sins of our past. The question is this: will we accept that new future or will we return to the pigsty of our old ways?

That’s a question not only for younger brothers but for older brothers as well. We said that we don’t know how the story ends for the younger brother; we don’t know if returns to his old ways after a brief stay at home. But, we don’t know how the story ends for the older brother either.

The father learns that the older son is outside, pouting about the return of his younger brother. And, out of love, the father goes out to talk with his older son. All the older brother can talk about is what the younger brother has done wrong. It’s as if the only way he can point to his own goodness is by pointing out the badness of his brother.

But, the trouble is that we older brothers and sisters in our self-righteousness forget how much we’ve been given and forgiven by the loving father. Why was the older brother so successful? Was it because he stayed at home and worked so hard? No, he was successful because he had been given everything.

This is a point that people often miss. In the beginning of the story when the youngest son demanded his inheritance early, what did the father do? He divided up all he had with both boys. One third of the estate went to the younger brother, and two thirds of the estate went to the older brother. The father out of extravagant love held back nothing from his sons.

SEPARATED BY RESENTMENT

But, the older son never appreciated how much he had been given. He had never been separated from his father and his home. He owned everything. And yet he wasn't satisfied. He couldn't come to the party and give thanks for what he had because of his resentment toward his younger brother.

I'm afraid this describes too many of us. We are not grateful for what we have and too critical of others. We try so hard to do the right thing, but our righteous behavior is a bit too determined and self-serving. We might never leave the place of our birth, but our self-righteous ingratitude leaves us as removed from the father's love as the young son who went to live in the far country.

We older sons and daughters can be prodigals as well. Remember I said that prodigal means wasteful. What do we older responsible righteous ones waste? We don't waste money. We don't waste time.

No, we waste something far more precious. We waste the father's love. We stay outside and refuse to join the party. We do not see our need for forgiveness and so we do not receive any. We cannot understand personally what Paul said long ago in his letter to the Romans, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Most of us don't understand know how bad we really are.

THE CHERRY SISTERS

Let me tell you a story, a true story about the fabulous Cherry Sisters. Leaving their home in the Iowa corn country in 1893, these four girls made their debut on a stage in Cedar Rapids in a skit they wrote themselves. For three years the Cherry Sisters performed to packed theaters throughout the Mid-West.

People came to see them just to find out if they really were as bad as people said they were. Their unbelievably atrocious acting enraged critics and provoked spectators to throw vegetables. Wisely the sisters traveled with an iron screen that they could erect on stage for self-defense.

Amazingly in 1896 the girls were offered a thousand dollars a week to perform on Broadway ... not because they were so good, but because they were so unbelievably bad. Seven years after the Cherry sisters had earned the then respectable fortune of \$200,000, they retired from theatrical life for the more peaceful life down on the farm.

But, oddly enough, these Broadway stars remained convinced to the end that they were truly the most talented actresses to grace the American stage. They never knew how bad they really were.

And perhaps the same could be said of some of us older brothers and sisters. We don't know how bad we are. We are in the words of Mark Twain, good men and women "in the worst sense of the word."

We don't know that we need the love and forgiveness of the father as much as anyone else.

LOST AND DIDN'T KNOW IT

We older brothers and sisters are like a little boy who became separated from his mother in a shopping mall. He noticed a toy store as they walked by and just wandered in by himself.

Once the distracted mother noticed that her son was gone, she panicked. She contacted the security guards and announcements were made over the public address system. But, the little boy, intent on the toys didn't hear and didn't know that they were looking for him.

Finally, when the security guards found the little fellow in the toy store, his mother in a mixture of relief and anger rushed to his side and asked, "Why didn't you answer when we called for you?"

And the little boy blithely replied, “Gosh mom. I didn’t know that I was lost!”

There are many of us here today who don’t realize that we’re lost. We too, in a thousand different ways have separated ourselves from the love of our heavenly father. We may be like the younger son and waste our lives on the pursuit of pleasure. Or we may be like the older son and put too much trust in our own ability to achieve and do the right thing.

But, whatever the nature of our sin, the father is a greater prodigal than we could ever be. The father is prodigal, extravagant with his love. He never seems to tire of giving it away. He longs for us to come home and join the party. The father’s love is lavished on both the reckless young son and the self-righteous older son.

And the father’s love is lavished on us as well.

And so our story for today ends. The older brother is standing outside the house in the yard with his father, listening to the party going on inside.

What will the older brother do next? Will he join the family or will he remain outside in the darkness?

In the same way we must decide as well. Will we accept the father’s invitation to join the party or will we stand outside in our fear and guilt? Come home. Come inside and join the party, a party with a table full of reckless and righteous saints, brothers and sisters united by the common bond of a father whose love is more extravagant than we could ever imagine. Amen.