

The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family
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Luke 15:11-32

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 DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

Parables are stories with a surprise.

And its in the surprise that we learn something about the kingdom of God.

But, it’s hard to be surprised by today’s parable.

We’ve heard it many times.

We think that we know it very well.

It’s about the love of a gracious father.

This father demonstrates the grace of God toward a wayward son, the prodigal. Right?

I’ve interpreted the story this way for many years.

And that’s certainly part of the story.

God is gracious.

God does welcome us back home.

God does forgiven our sins.

But, the parable is more complicated than this.

This is not just the parable of the prodigal son, or the parable of the loving (and sometimes indulgent) father or even the parable of the self-righteous brother.

I would contend that this is the parable is about all of the above.

Following the lead of Barbara Brown Taylor on this, I would call it the parable of the dysfunctional family.

Everyone is messed up in this story.

And the question that the parable asks is this:
What needs to happen to bring the family back together? What can make this dysfunctional family functional again?

Of course, when you think about it, who among us is NOT a member of a dysfunctional family?

In fact dysfunctional is a word that describes not only what is going on in the family but also what is going on in the church, in politics and ... you name it.

Everywhere relationships are breaking down.
People are flaunting the basic rules of civilized society.

This is truly a parable for our time.
We need to hear this parable.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In order to really understand what's going on in this story, we have to understand how people would have heard this parable in the ancient world.

In our world young people leave home all the time.
It's expected.

In fact if young people don't leave home and strike out on their own it's seen as a problem, a "failure to launch."

But, this was not the case in Jesus' day.
In Jesus' day most people worked on a farm.

And the only thing these farmers had of value was the land. In order to work the land successfully, you had to have children, preferably sons who stayed home.

This was necessary for survival.

In this farming community there was one hard and fast rule. The father was in charge.

(You know, I'm starting to think the old ways might be the best!)

Anyway, this meant Fathers did not plead with their children. Fathers told their children what to do in no uncertain terms.

Fathers didn't run to their children.
Children ran to their fathers.

And fathers certainly didn't divide their inheritance early. Early rabbis put it this way,

"There are three who cry out and are not heard:

he who has money and lends it without witnesses,
he who acquires a master,
and he who transfers his property to his children in his lifetime."

The father in our story for today breaks rule number three. He gives in to the youngest son's plea and transfers his property to his children in his lifetime. The older son gets most of the land, but the younger son gets a big share as well.

A CRITICAL MISTAKE

And the younger son sells his share of the family land and hits the road.

In one fell swoop, the father loses control of his estate and his family. And he has no one to blame but himself.

The older brother loses all respect for the old man after this stunt, and the younger brother does exactly what you would expect a younger brother to do.

He wastes his inheritance on wine, women and song.

What kind of father does this?

Who gives his teenage son alcohol and car keys?

The result is predictable. There is going to be a crash.

But, that's what the father does, and he soon recognizes that he has made a horrible mistake. The old man stands by the road every day, hoping that his son might come home.

But, it's not to be.

The community takes note. They say,

"Isn't it sad. But, he has no one to blame but himself.

Whoever heard of dividing up the family land early? It's crazy."

The older son thinks it's crazy too.

His work load has doubled because his kid brother is off sowing his wild oats.

And the resentment builds.

FAMINE IN THE FAR COUNTRY

Meanwhile, the good times are no longer rolling for junior. A famine hits the far country, and junior runs out of money.

So, what does he do?

He goes to work for a guy who raises pigs.

Could there be a worse job for a Jewish boy?

Junior gets so hungry that he even envies the slop that they feed the pigs.

And that's when it hits him.

“Even the servants in my father’s house have it better than this.

I might not be able to go home as a son.
But, maybe I can go home as a servant.

The old man has a soft spot for me.
I wonder what I can tell him.
I know. I’ll say this,

‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son;
treat me like one of your hired hands.’”

I’m suspicious of junior’s speech.
He has squandered his portion of the family inheritance. He has put the whole family at future risk with his irresponsible behavior.

He has alienated his brother for life.
He has shamed his father and broken his heart.

And now he is going to repent and come home again?

THE TRIP BACK HOME

Actually, ancient custom dictated that he not be allowed to come home again.

The Talmud (the official Jewish commentary on the law) describes a ceremony to deal with a Jewish boy who loses the family inheritance to the Gentiles.

If he ever shows up in his village again, the villagers fill a large jug with burned nuts and corn. They break it in front of the prodigal, shout his name out loud, and pronounce him cut off from his people.

After that, he would truly be an orphan.
He would be estranged not only from his family but also from his people and the Promised Land forever.

Junior knows that he must reach his father before the village reaches him.

So, he has his confession speech ready.

But, I don't think it's a confession born out of repentance. I think it's a confession born out of hunger.

Junior doesn't care so much about what he has done to the family. Junior cares about where his next meal is coming from and having a roof over his head.

Junior is a survivor.
So he goes back home.

THE WELCOME BACK PARTY

Junior knew his father well.
He did indeed have a soft spot for his young son.

Apparently the father still waited by the road every day hoping for his son to come home.

And while his son was still far off, the father saw him.
Filled with compassion the father did what no self-respecting father would do.

He ran to greet him.
And then he threw his arms around him.
And he kissed him.

Junior thought that now might be the time to start his prepared speech,

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But, dear old dad wasn't listening to any speeches.
He was getting ready to throw a party.

He tells the slaves to bring the best robe in the house, to put a ring on his young son's finger and sandals on his feet.

More than this, he tells them to kill the fatted calf.

Why the fatted calf, you may ask?
I'm glad you asked!

Because this was going to be a party for the whole village. There would be no more talk of disowning the prodigal.

This was going to be a banquet of reconciliation.

And everyone was invited.
But, not everyone would come.

THE OLDER BROTHER

The father in our parable was overly indulgent.
In many ways the father's lack of discipline was to blame for his young son's shenanigans.

But, he is in many ways, the more sympathetic of all the characters in the parable.
You would hope that the story would end right here with everyone celebrating together. Maybe the two brothers would even hug and make up.

But, remember this is the story of the dysfunctional family. And dysfunctional families are not known for their forgiveness.

The older son shows up, hears the music and the dancing, and refuses to come into the house.

Once again the older brother in me understands.

No one asked him how he felt about spending what was left of his inheritance taking care of three people instead of two. No one asked him about putting the best robe and a ring on his brother's finger.

The elder son stayed home.
He did everything right.
He's not about to sit at table with this self-centered, pig-loving brother.

He refuses to come into the house.

This was a terrible insult to his father in front of the whole village.
The only way for the father to save face is to stay right where he is at the head of the table and ignore his elder son's conspicuous absence.

But, we already know that honor means nothing to this father, at least when it comes to his sons. He will do anything to keep the family together.

So, he leaves the table and hurries outside to be with his older son.

I imagine that heads nodded and eyes rolled at the banquet that day.
Will this father never learn that his lack of discipline is making his family dysfunctional?

But, the father doesn't care.
He doesn't care about his property or his honor.
All he cares about is his sons.

The one who was lost has come home.
It's a miracle.

And he's not about to lose another son.
He is willing to sacrifice anything to keep his eldest son safe at home.

So, dad leaves the table and goes outside.

The older son states his case.
He has been taken for granted.

For many years he has obeyed his father's every command.
And yet dear old dad hasn't thrown him a party.
He hasn't even slaughtered a goat, much less a fatted calf to honor him.

He says, "How am I supposed to feel when this son of yours comes home after wasting our family fortune on wine, women and song, and you throw him a party?"

Listen carefully to what the father says.
"I've always been with you and for you.
Everything I have is yours."

In the end the father is fair to the older brother.
Except for what the younger brother wasted, the older brother now owns it all.

And more than that, he has the unqualified love of his father.
He's always had it.

But, in order for the family to be whole again, one thing has to happen.
The younger brother has to be welcomed back home.

He who was lost now is found.
It's like a resurrection.
He was as good as dead, but now he's back home.
That's a reason to celebrate.

The father said, "We had to celebrate."

And that's where the story ends.

The father and the son are standing out in the yard.
Even from there you can still hear the music and the dancing.

There's plenty left to eat.

But, the father will not be joining the party, not while his son is hurting, even if some of his wounds are self-inflicted.

The father will not be satisfied until his dysfunctional family is whole again.

THE ORIGINAL CONTEXT

Who heard this parable originally?
Two groups.

The first group was made up of tax collectors and sinners. They came close to Jesus to hear what he had to say.

The other group did not come close to Jesus.
They were the religious people.

They were the righteous ones.

They were the responsible people who loved their country and tried to do God's will.

And this group wondered out loud as they stood from afar, how Jesus could welcome tax collectors who betrayed their country and sinners who lived like pigs.

Jesus answered their question with three parables.

The first was the parable of the sheep.

The shepherd who had a hundred sheep left the 99 in order to find the one who was lost.

And there was great celebrating when the lost sheep was found.

Jesus gave this interpretation, "... there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

The second parable was about a woman who had ten silver coins and lost one. She tore the house apart to find the missing coin, and when she did she celebrated.

Jesus then gave a similar interpretation to this parable. He said, "... there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

And then Jesus told the parable of the dysfunctional family.

The point of that parable was this:

We all need to come home.

All of us have separated ourselves from the family in one way or another. Some of us have been separated from the family by careless and unrighteous behavior.

And some of us have been separated from the family by our pride and self-righteous attitudes.

But, when push comes to shove the most important thing is reunion and reconciliation.

Dysfunctional families never come together unless there is a willingness to forgive.

You can't join the party if you refuse to come into the house.

COME TO THE TABLE

This parable is an invitation.

Jesus invites us to join the party.

Jesus wants us to come sit at the table.

He reminds us at the table that we are a family who seeks to bring the lost back home.

We welcome people from the East and the West and the North and the South.

No country is too far.

No country is beyond the reach of God's love.

So come.

Sit at the family table.

Sit at the table where his body is broken for us.

Sit at the table where his blood is shed for us.

Sit at the table where grace is served in abundance.

That's God's cure for the dysfunctional family.

Sinners have been saved.

Those who were dead have been raised to new life.

Our Lord invites all of us to drink the cup and eat the bread.

Come.

Let US join the celebration!

Amen.