

“The Prodigal Brother”

Luke 15:11-32

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most familiar parables Jesus told. Even those with a limited knowledge of the Bible can recite the story of the Prodigal Son. Perhaps this is one reason it has been labeled by literary critics as one of the greatest stories ever told.

The younger of two brothers left home with a lot of money and little maturity, which was a lethal combination. Because of his immaturity and irresponsibility, he lost all his money, along with his freedom and pride.

After squandering his fortune, he returned home with a broken and contrite heart, content to be a slave on his dad’s farm. To his surprise, however, he was welcomed home with open arms and given full status back into the family. To celebrate his homecoming, a lavish party was thrown in his honor.

It seems everyone was rejoicing over his return until the older brother came in from the field and heard the music. After discovering the reason for the celebration, he refused to participate, deciding instead to have a pity-party.

The story ends with the father explaining to the older brother why he was having a party for the Prodigal, hoping he would join the festivities. We are never told if he did, though.

What part of this story intrigues you the most? For me, it is the second part, which focuses upon the reaction of the older brother to the lavish welcome his brother received when he returned home.

At first, you have to wonder why this section was included in the parable. It seems natural to end the parable on a happy note at the homecoming party, like a Hallmark Movie.

Why did Jesus attach this unresolved ending that leaves us with such ambivalent feelings and unanswered questions? I pondered this for some time last week and want to offer two suggestions.

It appears to me the second part of the story was included to remind us that everyone does not have the heart of the father of the Prodigal Son. The scribes and Pharisees certainly did not, and Jesus knew it. As a matter of fact, the opening verses in this chapter indicate this was Jesus' primary reason for telling this parable and the two that preceded it.

"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Then Jesus told them this parable." (Luke 15:1-2)

Who did the self-righteous and jealous older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son represent? You know; it was the scribes and Pharisees.

There was no room in their judgmental hearts or narrow theology for the people Jesus spent time with and befriended. Not only did they fail to understand why Jesus was kind to these people, they criticized him severely for even associating with them.

I have to wonder how many people the scribes and Pharisees drove back to the far country with their harsh and critical spirit. I fear the number would be astounding.

How many have we driven back?

Years ago, I made a startling and disturbing discovery when it dawned on me that pure grace makes most people angry. To a degree, I understand. Grace is radical, illogical and absurd.

It is also transformative. Grace can redeem the most rebellious and irresponsible person because it provides a way forward out of a mess and hope for a better life.

Redemption, however, was not on the older brother's radar; revenge was. He did not love his brother nearly as much as he loved himself and was jealous of all the attention his brother received that should have gone to him.

It is not easy to love the unlovely and unlovable. No one ever said it was, especially Jesus. It is what the gospel calls us to do, though.

Anyone can hate and hold a grudge. This is human nature, but not God's nature.

The gospel does not call us to trade love with those who like us or those we like. The gospel compels us to give it away, one person at a time, and I have to tell you I am thrilled it does. I thank God for all the people who have loved me at my worst and forgiven me when I said or did hurtful things. Where would I be without their grace and mercy?

Why did Jesus include the response of the older brother in this parable? He wanted to make sure his listeners understood that loving people like God does will be met at times with resistance, and that resistance may even come from religious people.

Be faithful in spite of the criticism you encounter. You have been called to reflect the heart and nature of God, not be popular.

There is another reason I believe Jesus included the sequel to this parable. **He did not want us to be caught off guard when the solution to one problem is followed immediately with a new challenge.**

There is a reason celebrations don't last long. They get pushed off stage by a new set of problems that must be confronted and overcome.

Surely your family and friendships are no different than mine. As soon as one problem is solved, it is quickly met by another one, often bigger and more menacing.

Your heart has to go out to the father in this story. He cannot even enjoy the celebration for his son's return home because he has to deal with the rebellion of his other son, who by the way refused to call the younger son his brother.

You can only imagine how tense the conversation was between the father and his older son. It was a good thing the music was loud at the party. Hopefully, it drowned out the insults and accusations that came from the older brother.

We yearn for a time when all our problems will be solved and difficult issues resolved. Sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking that day is just around the corner.

The truth is, it is not and never will be. Relationships are messy. They are filled with great hopes, big dreams and many disappointments.

People say and do dumb things, just like both of this father's sons did. Family and friends make promises, and they break promises. They let us down when we need them most. They abandon us in our darkest hours. They embarrass and humiliate us in front of others.

This is why every family and circle of friends need someone like the father of the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Brother. Someone has to love the unlovely as much as God and Jesus do. Someone has to take the initiative to give people who have made mistakes a chance to rebuild their lives. Someone must be this wise and have a heart this big.

When Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher was asked, "Where is God?" he succinctly replied, "God is between people."

Is this where you are today? Is it where you need to be?

I know someone who understands and will help you.