

March 27th, 2022

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 “Dealing With the F-Word”

I had a discussion with my kids a few years back about what Bible lessons they remember from Church Camp. “Oh, that’s easy. The Good Samaritan, the Fruits of the Spirit, and the Prodigal Son.” They weren’t wrong. Those three scriptures were the framework for at least a dozen camp curriculums I’ve used over the last 30 years. When I saw that the lectionary text for this week was the Prodigal Son, I thought, “People are probably sick of that parable and don’t want to hear another sermon on it.” But the lectionary gave me Luke and that’s what we’ve been studying. I thought, “I wonder how many sermons I’ve preached on this Parable over the last 14 years?” I found two sermons about the Prodigal Son on my office computer. The only thing I found on my backup drive were copies of those two sermons. I thought, “Have I really only preached on the Prodigal Son twice in 14 years?” Looks like that’s the case. But I’m sure I’ve used it a lot at camp!

I think folks are pretty familiar with the basics of the story. It’s a common “meta-theme” in literature, music, and film. Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Edward Zwick’s film *Legends of the Fall*, and the song *Carry on My Wayward Son* by Kansas are just a few examples. The story starts out with, “There was a man who had two sons.” One of the sons demanded his share of his inheritance but he blows it on wine, women and song and becomes homeless. He comes back home and begs the father to take him back. The father says, “of course” and welcomes him back. Let’s throw a party while we’re at it. The older brother says, “What the heck dad? Are you seriously going to welcome this *son of yours* back home and throw a party? I’ve *always* been faithful and what have you ever done for me?” The dad says, “Yes, thank you for your faithfulness, but *this brother of yours* was once dead but now he’s alive. He was lost, but now he’s found.” Then the preacher gives a sermon and asks the big question: “Who did you relate to most in this story? The younger brother who was unfaithful but *thankful* for the grace he received? Or the older brother who was faithful but *resented* the grace his younger brother received?” See, that’s low hanging fruit for a preacher. That’s the sermon you save for when you don’t have time to put a lot of thought or research into a sermon. But this story has so much more to it than what’s on the surface. Like last week’s parable of the vineyard, we don’t always understand the full meaning of the story because we’re so far removed from the time and culture. We don’t comprehend the nuances that folks who lived in the first century would have noticed.

The first thing we've got to look at is why Jesus even told this parable. Jesus told this parable because some Pharisees and scribes were criticizing him because "he welcomes sinners and eats with them." And before he got around to telling this parable of the father and two sons, he told two shorter parables – one about a lost sheep that had been found and a woman who found a lost coin. He saved the big parable for last. So these parables were told in order to explain why Jesus welcomes and eats with sinners.

The second thing to consider is how absurd and outrageous this story would have sounded to his listeners. By asking ... no *demanding* his share of the inheritance the son is rejecting his father and family in a way that says, "I wish you were dead." Also, what he asked for wasn't money. That's where our modern-day minds automatically go when we hear this parable. "Oh, he's wanting dad to cash out the kid's trust fund." No, this kid's share of the inheritance is property - which means livestock and land that has been in the family for generations. In order to sell this land for cash, the son would have to find someone from outside the family who would be willing to buy it. That would have been a huge disruption to the family's ability to do business.

Then there's the scandal of the father's response. Culturally speaking, the father's correct response would have been to not only reject the son's request but to punish him for even making such a ludicrous demand. Even if the father gave in to his son's demand, the son would have been expected to retain control of the land so that he could pass it on down to his descendants. Again, by giving his son the land *and* the right to sell it so he could cash it in and go do whatever he wanted with it was scandalous and absurd. The people hearing this parable would have laughed in disbelief! "Oh, come on Jesus. This would *never* happen in the real world! Not in a million years!"

Here's a third thing to consider – we call this story "The Prodigal Son." What does "prodigal" even mean? Prodigal means one who is wasteful. So when we talk about the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we think of the son's wastefulness. He wasted away his life with the money he made by selling his inheritance. What this parable *should* have been called though was "The Parable of the Prodigal Father." Did you feel the shift in the air from the collective gasp over such a outrageous suggestion? "Prodigal *father*?!" But that's not what this parable is called! See, right here in my bible, it says, "The Prodigal *Son*." Well, not every bible has the same headings. In fact, the titles aren't in the ancient manuscripts. It was only a few hundred years ago when Bibles were translated into the common language and printed for the public that translators started putting these headings in to help

readers find what they're looking for. The heading that I like and think is most accurate is, "The Lost Son." But if prodigal means wasteful, and you want to use that word in the title, I think "The Prodigal Father" is the best. Why?

Because the father's grace was wasteful. Think about it. The son was given the freedom to reject his family, to wish his father dead and to squander what his father and generations before him spent his life working for. "Prodigal son." Like he's the hero of this story. Where in this story does it say he expressed any regret for what he did? The only thing I see in this kid is a fear of dying and for his wish to be fulfilled. The son thinks it's all about him. He doesn't even consider what he did to others. Yeah, but he said, "I have sinned against heaven and against you." That's exactly what Pharaoh said to Moses in order to get Moses to make the plagues stop! Pharaoh wasn't repentant. He just wanted his suffering to stop. That seems to be the case here with the son. He wasn't happy living with the pigs, so he wanted to come home. He rehearsed this little "Sorry dad" speech ahead of time because he figured that's what would get him out of the pig troughs.

Here's something else that would have shocked those who heard this parable: Jesus said the father *ran* to greet his son. Even before he heard his son's selfish pre-rehearsed excuses, the dad ran to him when he saw him coming from a distance. Running to greet his son would mean that he left his dignity, honor, and his right to enact punishment on his son, which by the way, would be expected of a father whose son wrecked the family so badly. Running would have also been considered shameful because running would have exposed his legs which was considered disgraceful and undignified in his day. Then he said, "Oh, here's my son! Go find a robe for him, the best one! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet." The ring wasn't just a random piece of jewelry for fashion's sake. It was likely the family signet ring which would grant the wearer access to the family's resources. The modern equivalent, I suppose, would be getting him a Brooks Brothers suit, giving him the passcode to all the bank accounts and a master key to every building and barn onsite.

Then there's the exchange between the father and the oldest son. Once again, the father ignored social norms and left the party. He was the host! It would be rude to leave his guests, especially to go appease his oldest son's anger. Speaking of the oldest son's anger, let's not forget how he must've been feeling. He didn't think he was being treated fairly, and to be honest, most of us wouldn't blame him for feeling the way he did. He's the good kid, but dad never threw a party for him! However, according to the social norms of the day, this son's behavior would be considered unacceptable because he is supposed to be subordinate to his father.

Dad's the boss. It would be disrespectful for him to challenge his father's actions. He separated himself from the family to tell his father how he's entitled to the family's resources.

What we take for granted as a perfectly relatable story was shockingly scandalous to the people who heard it. Let's not forget why Jesus told this story. He was responding to criticism that he welcomed sinners and ate with them. For Jesus, the answer to their critique is, "I'm only doing what God would do. And guess what? God isn't fair." There's that shift in the air again! Ready for another one? Jesus dropped the F-word right there in the presence of the tax collectors, sinners, scribes, and Pharisees. Dr. Song Nai Rhee, one of our professors in college used to say that the biggest F-word in scripture is "fair." We humans want things to be fair, but we only want to use *our* definition of fair. What we think is fair isn't always what God thinks is fair.

See, the scribes and Pharisees that were there that day were behaving like the older brother in the parable. They felt like they'd done everything right and are more deserving than the tax collectors and sinners. It's not fair that Jesus eats with them. Here's the point of this scandalous parable though. The lost son and even the faithful son are just a setup to highlight and celebrate the father's kindness. "There was a man who had two sons." The banquet wasn't about the lost son, it was about the father's grace. The scribes and Pharisees who were criticizing Jesus for eating with sinners are like the oldest son. The tax collectors and sinners are the younger son. What those scribes and Pharisees fail to see is that the banquet is for everyone. It's not just for the tax collectors and sinners. Those scribes and Pharisees were invited to the banquet too. But they choose not to eat with the sinners. It's on them. The table has been set, the invitation has been sent to everyone, but they can't get past the F-word. It's not fair.

Now I can ask the question: In this parable who do you relate to the most, and more importantly, why? Are you like the youngest son who may not really understand what you've done wrong but you're still under the mercy and grace of your father? Are you like the oldest son who feels slighted and resentful because you don't think your father is being fair even though he's the only one who has the right to show grace? Or are you like the father who doesn't care what anyone else thinks ... you're going to be radically kind, merciful and gracious to all even if it doesn't meet everyone's expectation of "fair?" May God's mercy, grace, and love abound here on earth as it is in heaven and may God bless your time of reflection on this parable. Amen.