

Providence Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 15 – Becoming the Father

I realize that I may be risking revolt by preaching on the same parable for three weeks. Therefore, I promise that after today, following the lead of the lectionary cycle, I will not preach on this parable again for three years. You will need a good break from it. I mean, there is enough in this parable to drive one nuts. Brats getting off easy. Older brothers in their self-righteous indignation. Family dysfunction to rival your worst holiday moments. It is full of energy and grace and only partially satisfying resolutions. There are a lot of details missing. Our frustrations with both the sons may not be fully resolved. We may not be all that thrilled with the father of the story either.

We've been talking about this parable for several weeks now: Ruminations, two Sunday sermons, a couple weeks of Tuesday mornings. From our several conversations, I am struck by the fact that while there is a lot I find beautiful in this story, there is also a lot that is messy. For a story all about God's love that brings us back to the fold, there are all these triggers, all this baggage hitting the fan, everybody triggered by and reacting to each other.

For example, I wonder what the straw was that broke the camel's back. What made this younger son leave. What made him react to have to get out of there, take what he could get, and go far away. He seemed to feel he was missing out on a full life, needed to find his own path. And while he ends up at the head table, the honoree of the banquet, we know little of his attitude, little of what inner change has happened in all this, little of whether or not we may like him any better than before. And so, we might be sympathetic to that older son's unhappiness. And this older son, though he worked hard and was responsible, he felt like he missing out also. And he accepts it all until he sees his brat brother get what he always wanted – a celebration and recognition. Seeing his rebellious and wasteful brother celebrated, he wonders what all that hard work was for. He has been good, and if his brother can be celebrated, he doesn't know what that goodness was for. He is mad at his father. He feels estranged, and he is now reacting in a way that he has become a rebellious, disrespectful, and shameful son, even after years of obeisance.

Then there is the father bending over backward, running, pleading, trying to piece together his family. The community has to be a little embarrassed, irritated if not angered, and incensed by the younger son, and now by the elder son, and probably at this point, the father also. It is a messy story, full of triggers; full of hurt and

angst and reactivity. Like that Thanksgiving you want to forget, everybody's baggage got triggered, everybody was not at their best, stayed too long, had too much to drink, and it all hit the fan. And even though the father has desperately got everyone, hopefully, back into the house, it is still messy, bad feelings possibly lingering.

The good news of the story is that there is grace for everybody. The younger son gets back to the banquet, and the elder son is invited to the banquet (we are hoping he comes), the same banquet the whole community has also been gathered into already. But is that the end of it? We just accept and forgive and welcome one another back to the banquet? Is that enough? Or will we just worry that the younger son will fall back into the old way of rebellion, manipulation, and wastefulness? Will we be waiting for the older son to revert to his self-righteousness, resentment, and pulling away? Can we maintain the balance in the long run? Will it hold up if this is the end of it? Or will all unravel with time and the drama have to replay? Can we maintain the balance, keep the triggers under control, avoid the constant reactivity.

Perhaps this is why we have noted on a few occasions that the story is really about the father, about the father's actions and the father's love, not whether the sons' actions and feelings and intents are trustworthy. In fact, it is likely that Jesus is really just giving us a window into himself, talking about his own heart and why he is ministering to others the way that he is. He is disclosing his own passion both for the far off and the close in, the blatant sinner and the dutiful servant of God's commands. Jesus tells this story in response to the Scribes and Pharisees' complaint that Jesus is eating with the unclean/sinners. The story casts the younger son as a type of "sinner" and the older son as a type of Pharisee. And the father is likely Jesus himself.

Yes, the story is about Christ and Christ's passion, about Christ's love and grace extended to each of us. And yet, perhaps the story doesn't stop there either. Perhaps the balance will not hold if it just stops there.

The now-deceased writer and contemplative, Henry Nouwen, suggested in his book "the Return of the Prodigal," that the movement continues. It has to. He says that as listeners that may relate to aspects of both the younger son and the older son, the story's movement is ultimately an invitation to be like the father of the story, to take on the character and the response of this father.

Now I love Nouwen. But from a literary point of view, I've never seen a hint in the text, never seen the subtlest clue in the language or the structure of the story that

Jesus is saying that. There is nothing explicit that suggests that. And yet, I've always wondered if he isn't right. For Jesus will distill all the law and the prophets down to the command to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. But in John 13, he raises the bar further. He says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have [this kind of] love for one another." To love one another, as Christ has loved us.

Peter's first letter lifts up a similar call, echoing words that repeat throughout the old and new testaments – to follow the example of God, himself. "Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written (quoting the old testament), "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

But where many have gotten confused, the Pharisees included, is that we associate the "holy" with the cordoned off and quarantined and constrained. We think to be holy is to separate ourselves from the sinners and tax collectors. To be holy is to adhere to the law as dutifully as we can muster, build up a resume of good behavior, and be better than others, more right than others. And so, we might be tempted to follow the way of the Pharisees, because that is what they have done. But, it is the Pharisees who are confronted in this parable. It is the Pharisees who are missing something about what this all means.

You see, foundationally, to be holy means to be set apart. To be distinctive from the world, set apart from all that is ordinary and acceptable and profane. To be different. We often think this means spatially that holy things do not come into contact with unholy things. But is Jesus transforming the notion of the holy, that to be set apart and distinctive does not require spatial separation, but a transformation in thinking? I think of Paul's admonition in Romans 12: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Be set apart and distinct from the world, and you will need your minds transformed to discern it. Do not follow the ordinary patterns, but be transformed so that you may discern God's good and perfect will.

Or as Isaiah puts it,  
"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways,"  
declares the Lord.

9 "As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

And so, we are called to be holy, set apart, distinctive, different, in the way that God the Father is set apart, distinctive, different. And what Jesus suggests is that this holiness is not achieved by spacial separation, by removing unholy and profane people from God's presence, but by a unique and distinctive pattern of love and grace. Be set apart in the way that your Father is set apart from this world. Love one another in the way that I have loved you. Break from the set patterns you have been reared in, and follow my lead.

Therefore, this parable's invitation with its movement goes beyond just coming to the banquet. It is take on the character of the father, and to take on the character and impulses of Christ himself.

You see, the way we are to handle the messiness and all the triggers that are tripped in and by this parable, it is not just to reign in our reactions. It is not to stifle our resentments, questions, or frustrations and push it all down and hide it. It is not to begrudgingly come to a banquet for a brother that we are still not convinced deserves it. It is not to relent and to say, "fine!" It is not to just try to accept one another even when we don't understand and or care for each other's choices. It is to move beyond our triggers, to move beyond our hurts and pains, resentments, frustrations, and our unresolved questions and all our reactivity, and to take on something of the Father, to take on something of Christ's own patterns and character. Be set apart and distinctive and different from the world in the way that Christ himself is, in the way God is.

It is to be able to be centered and self-aware enough that we are not always just reacting to others, reacting to each other's behaviors or actions or lack of action. It is to get to a place where we can be present to others in some kind of selfless and unconditional and compassionate manner. It is to get to a place where we are more concerned about the redemption and healing of the other than we are our own righteousness or our hurts or feelings or resentments or standards, or a sense of what is fair or equitable. It is to be able to love without reservation, to do what is necessary without feeling that we are somehow missing out. It is to be able to act out of God's character, not the brokenness of our sinful character.

The Scribes and Pharisees are sure Jesus was disrespecting the law and the traditions by showing friendship and grace to the unclean and unholy. But I think of what Jesus says in the sermon on the mount. "Do not think that I have come to

abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Yes, he says he is all about upholding the law, but more so the fulfillment of the law. And furthermore, he says, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

You see, when we know that we have finally gotten this parable, when the punch line has finally landed, perhaps it is not just when the older son decides to come to the banquet and celebrate the homecoming of sinners. Perhaps it is when the actions of the father no longer seem strange to us. Perhaps it is when the passion that makes him run and throw himself on the younger son, and the impulse to celebrate that child, and to plead with the older son – when all that messy grace and passion no longer feels strange, or problematic, but rather the most holy and natural thing to do – then we have begun to get it.

When we are willing and able to move past all that triggers us, all that reactivity and frustration, so that we can be the unconditional grace-giver, then we are growing in Christ-likeness. Then we are learning what it means to be holy and distinctive in the way the father is, and maybe we will have begun to understand the fulfillment of the law.

And all God's people said...

*A Call to Holy Living*

<sup>13</sup> Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. <sup>14</sup> Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. <sup>15</sup> Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; <sup>16</sup> for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

<sup>17</sup> If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. <sup>18</sup> You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, <sup>19</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. <sup>20</sup> He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. <sup>21</sup> Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

<sup>22</sup> Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. <sup>23</sup> You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. <sup>24</sup> For

“All flesh is like grass  
and all its glory like the flower of grass.  
The grass withers,  
and the flower falls,

<sup>25</sup> but the word of the Lord endures forever.”

That word is the good news that was announced to you.