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The Gospel of Luke
LIII. The Prodigal Father
Luke 15:11-32

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We have traditionally called it the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I can understand why: the younger son certainly is prodigal in his behavior – “prodigal” meaning “*rashly or wastefully extravagant,*” according to my dictionary. Nonetheless that title is wrong, on two counts. First, because the younger son is not the central figure in Jesus’ story. Neither is the elder son, for that matter. The central figure is their father. The proof is right there in how the story begins: “*There was a man who had two sons.*” And secondly, reading this story carefully, we see that the truly prodigal character is not the younger son anyway – it is the father. You see, “prodigal” has a second meaning. “Prodigal” can also mean, “*giving or given in abundance.*” And it is this second meaning which best describes how the father relates to both of his sons. This is the parable of the prodigal father.

“There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’” It is hard for us, in this time and culture, to grasp how grievously offensive this request really was.¹ The real crime of the younger son is not what he does in that far country, but what he does right here to his father. In that time and culture, demanding his inheritance was the equivalent of saying to his father, “*Dad, I wish you were dead.*” And the expected response would have been for the father to beat his son and cast him out of the house. It is, simply, an unthinkable request – one which violates every moral and religious and family value possible.

But what does this father do in response? He grants the request. Buries the anger, the hurt, the shame of having raised such a son as this – and grants the request. The prodigal father – “*giving or given in abundance.*” The father gives the son what he asks for. And the younger son sells off the property quickly to someone in the village, pockets the cash, and heads out. There is a little note in our story saying this was done quickly. Of course it was done quickly. In such a small village, word would get around quickly about what he had done to his father. And by doing what he has done, the son has not only offended and embarrassed his father, he has also brought down upon himself the hostility of the entire village. You bet he gets out of town quickly – the father may have been prodigal with the inheritance, but not doubt the villagers, given the chance, would have been prodigal in dishing out the punishment the father had withheld.

So, the younger son goes off into a far country and lives the high life – right up until the money runs out. That’s problem number one – no more money. Problem number two is that a severe famine breaks out in the Gentile territory where he has now found himself penniless and

alone. Normally, during such a famine, you could count on the pooled resources of the extended family to get you through. But he has no one to pool with in this far country, and he is becoming desperately hungry. So, Plan A: he takes a job feeding the pigs belonging to a Gentile farmer wealthy enough to still have pigs in this time of famine. But the pigs are eating better than he is – a sign of his current status. And no one, says the story, “*no one gave him anything.*”

So, in great hunger and desperation, he turns to Plan B – the plan of absolute last resort. And I do mean last resort, because it involves returning as a failure to the father he had wished was dead, and to the village that would gladly see him made dead. In fact, there was at that time something known as the “qetsatsah” ceremony practiced in villages like this, in response to situations like this. This ceremony is outlined in the Jerusalem Talmud from the time of Jesus. Someone who had done what this younger son had done would, if he ever tried to return home, be met at the entrance to the village by a hostile gathering of the villagers. The villagers would have in hand an earthenware jar filled with burned nuts and burned corn. They would stop the son at the entrance to the village, place this jar on the ground before him, and then smash it to bits. And the whole community would say in unison, “*You are cut off from your people.*” It meant that he was to be shunned from that moment on. No, worse than being shunned – it meant that they considered him to be dead to them. As if he no longer existed. And he would then be driven away from the village for good.

So this younger son’s only hope of Plan B working is for him to get to his father and persuade him whom he has wronged, before the villagers can get to him with the qetsatsah ceremony. He works up a strategy. Now this part of the story begins with the words, “*But when he came to himself*” – which we have long interpreted as indicating deep sorrow for his sins. But nothing at all about what the son decides to do suggests any such repentance. If he can get to his father first, somehow, then he will say to his father, “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.*” And then he will ask the father to let him work off his debt as a hired hand. But any first-century Jew hearing the son’s, not one bit of true repentance for his sins in it at all. Because they would have recognized that little speech – it is exactly what Pharaoh said to Moses after the eighth plague to try to convince Moses to stop the plagues. And we all know how sincere Pharaoh was about that! No, the boy is not repentant, he’s just hungry enough and desperate enough to try for the only option he has left of getting food in his belly.

Homeward he goes. Remember, in order for his plan to have a chance, he has to get to his father before the villagers can get to him with the qetsatsah. And his plan fails. Or, at least, it doesn’t work out at all the way he had planned it. For while he is still a ways from the village, his father spies him first. And his father then does something no middle-eastern father then or now would ever do – he runs out to meet him, before the son even gets to the village. Middle-eastern fathers, wearing long robes, do not run – ever. To run is to lose dignity, to make a spectacle of oneself in front of the neighbors, to be shown in a posture of weakness. It just isn’t done – and especially not to run towards a son who has done what this son has done. The father runs to his son – why?

The story says because he saw him and felt compassion for him. He runs to embrace his son to show compassion to him. He runs to embrace his son because he intends to get there first with his embrace, before the villagers can gather and get there with their qetsatsah ceremony.

Indeed, the father not only runs to greet his son – and not only does he embrace his son, this boy who has caused him so much pain and shame, but he also kisses him. And then, with the villagers beginning to gather around this unbelievable display, he cries out for his servants to bring for his son the best robe in the house – meaning the father’s own robe – and he puts it on his son as a sign that all is forgiven. The father calls for his signet ring to be placed on the boy’s finger, signifying his full restoration to the family. He calls for sandals for the boy’s feet, since only servants would be barefoot. And then, last and loudly, he calls for a fattened calf to be prepared for a feast – a celebration to which the whole village is invited – because, just as with the lost sheep returned and the lost coin found, there is joy in the father’s heart – *“For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”* And so the celebration begins.

Father and younger son are reunited. More than reunited, their relationship is now fully reconciled and restored. And not because of anything the son has done – it is all because of the prodigal love of the father for his son, *“giving or given in abundance.”* The village, though surely uncomprehending of the father’s behavior towards this terrible son, nonetheless takes their cues for how to respond to the boy’s return from his father. By which I mean that the qetsatsah does not happen, and everybody in the village shows up for the feast – it does take a village to eat an entire fattened calf! The father has welcomed home his younger son – and so the villagers do too, if for no other reason than for the father’s sake.

In fact, the only one not taking cues from the father on how to respond to the return of his younger son is the father’s elder son, the boy’s older brother. He comes in from the fields where he has been hard at work, sees the celebration with the whole village in full swing and so asks a young man outside the party tent what the party is all about. The young man says to him, *“Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.”* Safe and sound – although there is another way to hear that same expression. Not so much “safe and sound”, as that the father has received back his younger son with “shalom” – with peace, with reconciliation, with the making whole of all that had been broken. The elder son is furious at this news, the seeming injustice and just downright unfairness of his father’s response to his wayward brother. So he refuses to join the party. He sits and sulks outside the tent, though in full view of all the villagers, as well as his father. In fact, for the second time now, with a second son, the father finds himself being shamed in public – the family’s dirty laundry aired out for all to see, this time because of his elder son.

And actually, what the elder son does by refusing to participate in his father’s celebration, is an offense almost as great as that of the younger son in demanding his inheritance before dad was dead. By refusing to come into his father’s celebration, the elder son is visibly and publicly breaking with his father, breaking off his relationship with his father – almost as if he had wandered off into a far country of his own. And the expected response for such an offense, as with the sin of the younger son, would have been for the father to publicly beat and renounce his elder son.

But, once again, the father refuses to do so. Instead, he goes out to where his elder son is sitting – which, to the watching villagers, would have seemed as shameful and humiliating as for the father to go running down main street to embrace his younger son. As he ran out to greet his younger son, so now the father runs out to meet his elder son. Bearing the shame upon his own head, yet again, for what one of his children has done. This father going out in search of

reconciliation with his elder son, just as with his younger son – you know, like a shepherd going out searching for his lost sheep, a woman searching for her lost coin.

But the elder son greets his father with angry words. His father asks him, gently, to come in to the celebration, but his elder son spits it right back at him: *“Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours . . .”* – and note what he says right there, not “my brother,” but *“this son of yours.”* The brokenness, here, between the father and this elder son runs just as deep as it had between the father and the younger son.

But we see something else in the elder son’s complaint. The younger son thought he didn’t deserve, couldn’t possibly earn, the father’s love after what he had done. Plan B, remember, was to become a mere servant in his father’s house. The elder son, on the other hand, believes himself to have earned the father’s love; that, by his many years of faithfulness, he deserves the father’s love. In other words, both boys – if from different sides of the equation – but both boys are making the exact same mistake in relation to their father’s love for them. Both boys seem to believe that their father’s love has to be earned, can only be given if they have deserved it. And as the father embraced his younger son to show him that he still loves him in spite of all he has done, so now the father embraces his elder son to show him that he loves him also without regard for what he has done.

The father answers his elder son by telling him that his love never had to be earned because it had already freely been given. The father’s love was already his, everything was already his simply because he was his father’s beloved son. In fact, prodigally so – *“giving or given in abundance.”* Love without pre-condition, love without limit. This prodigal father’s prodigal love for both his sons – he loves them even to the point of being willing to embrace them regardless of what they might have done to hurt him or embarrass him or shame him. Unconditional love. Prodigal, abundant love. *“You are always with me; you don’t have to earn my love – it’s already and always yours. But so is my love for your brother also. Come, and help me celebrate the fact that my love has now restored to me my younger son – your brother – who was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”*

The story ends there. And we don’t get to know what the elder son will do in response to the prodigal father’s prodigal love for him. But, nonetheless, Jesus has now answered the grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees, which had prompted Jesus to tell this story in the first place, as well as the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Back at the start of this chapter, remember, the scribes and Pharisees had been watching Jesus interacting with a large group of what they considered to be really rotten sinners. They had said to one another, Jesus overhearing, *“This man receives sinners and eats with them.”*² What Jesus has now told them, through these three parables is this: *“Indeed, I do eat with sinners. But it is much worse than you imagine! I not only eat with them, I run down the road, shower them with kisses, and drag them in that I might eat with them!”* And, with that last bit about the elder son resenting the father’s love and grace directed towards the younger son, Jesus is clearly also now saying to the scribes and Pharisees – the good, law-abiding scribes and Pharisees – that, if they will let Him, He is longing to do the very same thing with them. Run to them, shower them with kisses, and drag them in to the celebration of God’s prodigal love for all of His children.

And what of us? What are we to take from this story, these stories? Simply this: that the prodigal love of our prodigal Heavenly Father is, even now, searching for to find us also. And we don't have to earn that love – it is already given to us. We are loved by One whose love for us cannot be broken – even by our brokenness. We are loved by One who longs for us to come home, to come in and to celebrate with Him in His joy forever – no matter how many times we may have hidden from Him or fled from Him in the past. We are loved by One whose love for us is indeed prodigal – giving or given in abundance. Giving or given in boundless, endless quantities and qualities. Love upon love, grace upon grace, mercy upon mercy, shalom upon shalom – all for us, all given to us, all to be ours forever.

For what could be more prodigal a gift of love than this, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans: “*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”³ Come home. Come in. To God's searching, prodigal love – for you, and for me, and for all His children.

¹ For this and all other cultural insights which follow, as well as for the general exposition of this text, I am drawing from Kenneth E. Bailey's, Finding the Lost Cultural Keys to Luke 15 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), pp. 109-193. A shorter form of this insights can be found in Kenneth E. Bailey, “The Pursuing Father,” Christianity Today, Vol. 42, No. 12 (October 26, 1998), pp. 34-40.

² Luke 15:2.

³ Romans 5:8.