

The Parable of the Dishonored Father

Preached FCCW, March 31, 2019

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Some of the religious folks began to take notice that many people who were coming to hear Jesus teach were not like the audiences other rabbis attracted. And not in a good way. They said, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!”

So, Jesus told them this parable...

In other words, this was how Jesus responded to their criticism about the company he kept and what it said about his own character.

Actually, Jesus told them, not just *a* parable, but *three* parables. The 15th Chapter of Luke’s Gospel could be aptly named “The Trilogy of Lost Animals, Objects and Relationships.” The entire chapter consists of three parables, each one directly addressed to the insinuation by the scribes and Pharisees that his acceptance of sinners and outcasts cast doubts upon the legitimacy of his ministry.

Each of the three parables is uniquely different yet all three share significant similarities. In each parable something is lost, then found. In all three there is great rejoicing and celebration over the retrieval of what had been lost. In each parable, the successful recovery of what was lost is accomplished through an unorthodox, illogical and unwise strategy. A shepherd leaves his whole herd of 99 sheep unprotected while he goes off on a fools mission to rescue one lost sheep, a woman turns her home inside out to find one lost coin instead of just letting it go because, after all, she has nine other coins, and a father embarrasses himself by bending over backwards to find an ungrateful runaway when he has another fine, upstanding son he can be proud of.

Each of these parables are named and known for the thing that was lost and found and rejoiced over. They are known as The Parable of the Lost Sheep, The Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But while each of the parables are named after what has been lost and found, the real hero of each story is the one who does the finding.

A case could be made for putting the focus where it belongs, by renaming the trio: The Parable of the Caring Shepherd, The Parable of the Tenacious Housewife, and the story we just read – would be The Parable of the Dishonored Father.

The father in the third parable is dishonored and disrespected by his younger son, who asks for his share of the inheritance while his father is still alive. He is basically treating his father as if he is already dead. But the father grants him what he asks for.

The Prodigal Son goes off to a foreign country where he spends his inheritance like there's no tomorrow-- and when tomorrow comes, there is a famine in the land and he is dead broke. He hires himself out to a foreigner as a farmhand where his job is taking care of pigs.

For an Israelite to be in servitude to a non-Jewish Gentile, especially by tending pigs –which Jews regarded as ritually unclean-- and envying the pigs' diet of discarded husks is the absolute picture of hitting rock bottom.

That's the point in the story when it says that "he came to himself." Which should not be mistaken for "he came to his senses." As in, he felt remorse for how he treated his father and recognized his duty to make amends. "He came to himself" in this story means that his well-honed, selfish instincts for his own preservation kicked into high gear.

He has already proved what a pushover his father can be, by how easily he was manipulated into giving him his inheritance in advance. And he wagers he can weasel his way back into his father's good graces with an insincere apology. Even if his father only takes him back as a hired hand, and he has to work to earn what had once been his by birthright, he'd still be better off than where he is now.

By now, the crowd of scribes and Pharisees to whom Jesus told this parable, would anticipate that by laying down the law this time, the dishonored father could regain a shred of the self-respect that he had lost when he foolishly gave the prodigal son what he asked for.

And the law as found in the 21st chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy said this: *If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.*

Stubborn, rebellious, disobedient, disrespectful, a glutton and a drunkard? This kid was guilty on all counts. According to the law, he deserved to be stoned to death.

Meanwhile, in the story, the prodigal son is on his way home, rehearsing the carefully planned lines he will say. Words that will fall on deaf ears. Not because his father's affection for him has been pushed past its limits; but because it knows no limits. As he rounds the bend in the road, he sees his father in the distance waiting and watching for his return. The father runs to greet him. And ignoring the pig slop that covers his son, he grabs him in a bear hug and kisses him. Before the

Prodigal gets the words, he's rehearsed out of his mouth his father has outfitted him with the finest robe from his wardrobe, a ring and sandals. And he orders a big celebration.

This is not the reception the son expected to receive. Not in a million years. It is a reception that catches the religious leaders to whom Jesus told this parable by surprise, as well. "Who does this?" they would have asked each other. A respectable father would have disowned this wretch.

The love of the Dishonored Father willingly ignores the authority that is his under the Law. Instead of charging that "This son of mine deserves to be stoned to death, he exults that "this son of mine was dead and is now alive."

If the parable ended right there, it would fit the pattern of the other two parables; the one of the lost sheep and the other of the lost coin. With what was lost being found. With rejoicing and celebration.

But there's another son in the story. The older son who stayed at home and didn't wander. When he hears that his younger brother has returned home to a hero's welcome he is enraged and refuses to take part in the celebration.

As the Father set aside his paternal authority to seek the prodigal son, he now goes out to plead with the elder brother for him to join the celebration. The elder son's angry words towards his father now reveal how his outward obedience to his father was just as insincere, manipulative and selfish in its own way, as was his brother's blatant disobedience.

The story ends with the father saying, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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.”

I imagine Jesus looking with pleading eyes directly at the scribes and Pharisees, as those words hung in the silence that followed the telling of this parable.

The scribes and Pharisees were intelligent men. They would have figured out by then that the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son in these parables stood for the lost sinners that Jesus attracted but they rejected. And that the foolhardy behaviors of the shepherd, housewife, and father of the prodigal were there to teach them what they had forgotten, about the reckless, relentless love of God for the lost ones that they berated Jesus for seeking and welcoming.

But, did they make the connection between the way the elder son also dishonored his father, and how their own uncharitable attitude towards those lost brothers and sisters, whom Jesus embraced, put distance between them and God as surely as the prodigal had put miles between himself and his father?

Jesus loved them all, loves us all, Pharisee and sinner alike, the way the father loved both sons in the parable. Like the dishonored father, he was willing to suffer humiliation – even the humiliation of the cross-- if that’s what it took to convince us all of that love.

What about us? Do we identify ourselves with either or both of the sons in the parable? Do we take offense that God’s love is sometimes wasted on those who don’t deserve it? When our choices put distance between us and God, do we realize that God waits eagerly and with open arms for us to come to ourselves and turn back to Him? Or that God rejoices when our relationships to Him and to one another, which were dead, are brought back to life; and, says to you and to me and to whoever we dismiss as outside the boundaries of God’s love: “My son,

my daughter, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. Let us rejoice together.”

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