

“ORDINARY PEOPLE DOING EXTRAORDINARY THINGS:
III – THE PRODIGAL FATHER”

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Luke 15:11-32

How many of you here grew up in a family with more than one child in it? Let me see a show of hands. I'm guessing you understand this parable, huh? – particularly, if you were one of two children in a family!

The great Charles Dickens once said that the parable of the prodigal son was the finest short story ever written or told. I think probably he said that because we so get it. We understand all too well the feelings and thoughts in this story.

Barbara Brown Taylor, professor and master preacher, says that she totally gets this story. Especially the older brother's part. She writes, “I am an eldest child myself. I know what it is like to break parents in, to step aside as they exercise their new and improved skills on younger siblings, and then to take the rap for the little criminals when they mess up.” Then she goes on to tell about a time when she was in the third grade, and her sisters were seven and three. One Saturday afternoon, she was supposed to be watching them. Their parents came home early and she said before she knew it, they “had hauled me up by my elbow to the upstairs bathroom, where they pushed open the door and showed me one of the most awful sights I had ever seen: my little sister Jennifer, clutching a fat black Crayola crayon in her fist, putting the finishing touches on the claw-footed porcelain bathtub that had once been white. Did she get punished? No (Taylor writes), she was just a little baby who did not know any better. Did I get spanked? Yes, I was the older sister who should have kept her out of trouble.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, “The Prodigal Father,” p. 164)

So you see why Barbara and any other older sibling would totally get this parable, right? She can just picture the older brother thinking, “That punk is the one who screwed up, and now I'm the one suffering.”

Well, let's go back and start at the beginning. Actually, before I do, I want to remind you why Jesus is telling this story in the first place. If you flip back in the Gospel in Luke for a few chapters, Jesus is in ministry with people and he's healing and teaching and loving and caring – and among those with whom he is healing and teaching and loving and caring are people considered “undesireable” in the culture of the day – tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners of all kinds. He's doing so much of this that the religious powers-that-be, most notably, the Pharisees are hot under the collar. They can't believe he's hanging out with those kind of people – and by

the way, breaking all sorts of rules to do it – rules like healing on the Sabbath and so forth.

So they make it plain to him that they are not happy about it. It doesn't seem to matter to them that people are being healed. It doesn't seem to matter that lives are being put back together. It doesn't seem to matter that people are being restored and perhaps know joy for the first time in their lives.

So Jesus tries to remind them of that, and he does so in these series of parables in Luke chapter 15. There are three of them – the first is about a lost sheep and the joy experienced when it is found. The second is the joy of a woman finding a lost coin. Well, those were well and good, but it would be easy for the Pharisees and others to think they were just nice stories.

So the third one Jesus tells is about people. And it is what we have come to call “the parable of the prodigal son,” but which might better be called simply “the parable of the prodigals” because the word “prodigal” means “extravagant” or “lavish.”

And it goes like this: A father had two sons. One day the younger son comes to him and tells him he wants to go off and see the world, but in order to do that, he needs some money, so could he please have his inheritance ahead of time. Reluctantly, his father gives it to him, and off he goes to find himself, as it were, and apparently, it was an expensive proposition, for he blew threw the money in no time.

He finds himself then in big trouble – nowhere to stay, nothing to eat, no prospects. He finds a job feeding a farmer's pigs, and one day, while he's hurling slop at the pigs to eat, it suddenly dawns on him that he could go back to his father and, despite everything he had done, be fairly certain he'd be treated better than this. So he decides he'll go back, throw himself at his father's mercy, and that will be that. He'll be home, all will be well, period.

So that's what he does. I'm sure while he's walking up the lane to his father's house, he's rehearsing in his mind the exact words he wants to say, so he's probably preoccupied, but then he looks up and can't believe what he's seeing – his father running – running! – toward him with arms open wide and tears streaming down his face and before he knows it, his father has embraced him in a great big bear hug and welcomed him home. He didn't even give him a chance to say his well rehearsed speech! He just hugged him and welcomed him home!

And then he tells the servants they're going to throw a party and to bring a robe and sandals, because it's going to be a whale of a party! And so they do.

Meanwhile, there's the other brother. You older siblings, stand by! He's out in the fields working when all this comes about – working like he did every day – doing the right thing, being the good son, following the rules, staying the course. He hears something in the distance, music, laughter – and asks what's going on –

and he hears, to his shock and no doubt, dismay, that his good-for-nothing, bratty younger brother who had taken off with a fistful of cash and left him behind holding the bag, as it were, has come home – and not only has his father let him – but he was celebrating – big time!

It's a little bit like Barbara Brown Taylor being punished for something her little sister did! To say that older brother was mad is the understatement of the century. "Are you kidding me? Are you kidding me? He left, he took his inheritance, he left me to work with Dad, and hold things together. I've been breaking my back on the farm and he's been partying with his friends. I've saved my money and he's spent every cent he had, and now he comes crawling home, and instead of getting yelled at, he's getting a party! Are you kidding me?"

Well, about that time, realizing that his older son hadn't come in, the dad comes out to get him. He wants him to join in the joy, but it was like cold water being splashed in his face when he got the full force of his elder son's anger poured out at him! If that father's heart broke when the younger son left town, it broke yet again when his older son refused to celebrate his younger brother's new life. That older brother was more concerned about being right than in being reconciled.

Hmmm . . . sounds like the Pharisees too, doesn't it? I wonder if they got that when Jesus was telling the story? And I wonder if we get it as we hear it?

How often do we break the heart of God when we refuse to forgive, or can't let go of the rules long enough to celebrate people experiencing new life? How often does God grieve the damage we do ourselves by holding bitter thoughts in our hearts about others? How often does God weep for us that our hearts are hardened because of something someone did or said to us – hardened so much that we can't move on and know full and abundant life?

Perhaps I don't know your story, but I've come to know a lot of people's stories over thirty years of ministry, and I know a lot of people hold resentment and unforgiveness in their heart against someone or something that happened to them. They just can't let it go. And for some reason, they feel like keeping that anger or unforgiveness gives them some sort of control or power over the situation or that other person, when in reality the only one that is held captive is the one who can't forgive, the one who can't let go.

After all, who was the older son hurting the most? He was hurting himself. He was shutting himself off from joy, from being a part of the family, from seeing his brother start a new life. And he was seething inside, which is never good, it takes such a toll on a person.

If you'd lived any time at all, you have probably known a person or persons like that. They're just plain unhappy. They get angry easily, they're impatient, they demand their rights all the time, and they're oftentimes, pretty tough – because they've built this protective shell around them – and it's very sad. We don't know that the older brother ended up that way, because Jesus, intentionally, I

think left off the end of the story. But chances are very good, that he could have ended up that way, if he didn't decide to forgive and move on and celebrate with his family.

Friends, anytime we're hurt, or we don't understand someone else's actions, Jesus says, we have a choice to make. We can close our hearts against them, and hold a grudge forever, or we can choose what the prodigal father did – and that is choose reconciliation and relationship. It will not be easy – indeed, of all of the extraordinary things done by the people in this sermon series – forgiving someone who has hurt you deeply may be the most extraordinary of all! But it is possible.

And you know why? Because we have received that kind of love and forgiveness ourselves. We have been forgiven of our sins by God in Christ Jesus. We hurt God by the things we say and the things we do; we, in so many ways take the money and run, caring only about ourselves and turning away from God over and over again; and yet, he loves us and forgives and welcomes us home with open arms – extravagantly and lavishly.

Having been loved by that, can we not love like that ourselves?

All of us probably remember the awful shootings a few years ago in an Amish schoolhouse not far from here – but do you remember that the very night of the shooting Amish families went to the home of the man who had shot their loved ones and sat with his grieving and stunned wife, offering love and forgiveness? Incredible, absolutely incredible. How could they do that? They could do it because God loved them, forgave them, accepted them first.

In a totally different vein, I remember reading a long time ago that when movie star Will Smith married Jada Pinkett he already had a child from a previous marriage. Will had divorced the mother of that child, and as in most divorces, there was no love lost between them. But when Will and Jada got married, they decided to include his ex-wife in all of the family celebrations – because their love for the child was more important than anything that had happened in the past. That's incredible, isn't it? So many people hold onto bitterness, wanting to prove that they're right rather than pursuing reconciliation and relationship.

The prodigal father loved both of his sons deeply, and wanted both of them to live full and abundant lives. The young son had a long journey to get there, but when he did, the father rejoiced. He wanted to do the same for his older son, but the older son needed to make the decision for himself. The choice was his.

And the choice is ours, my friends – the choice to love others as Jesus has loved us, the choice to give people a second, third, fourth chance, as Jesus has done for us, the choice to experience abundant life, that Jesus died to give us. But know this – it breaks the heart of God when we choose anger, bitterness and resentment, and if we're not careful, it can break ours as well. As one writer put it so well, "We will only find the wholeness God intends for us when we extend that wholeness to

others. Most especially, perhaps, those who have hurt us most of all.” (On-line, “Two Sons: How Will the Story End?” Janet Hunt)

So, friends, may we always remember God’s amazing grace in our lives, that we might pour that same grace upon others. In the words of the song we’re about to sing – “he touched me and made me whole” – may we go forth doing the same for others. May it be so.

Amen.