

“Breathtaking love”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

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Luke 15:11-32

If we could only retain one parable, one story taught by Jesus, this would have to be it - the parable of the Prodigal and his Brother. It presents to us a magnificent picture of a father's love for his two sons, both of whom are rebellious and difficult, and for whom the father will go to amazing lengths to express his love.

Now we probably all feel we know this parable well, we've heard enough sermons about it! But unless we fully understand the extent of its subtleties we will miss much of its impact. Our trouble is we are not first century residents of Galilee, the ears and brain and culture we bring to Jesus' teaching is 21st century western European.

Kenneth Bailey is a New Testament scholar who spent 40 years in the Middle East, discovering from village life in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt just how the parables of Jesus are understood by people of ancient Middle Eastern culture. My understanding of the prodigal and his brother has been hugely enriched by his knowledge and insights. So let's take a good look at this marvellous teaching story (attached) - my hope today is that no matter how well we know this parable, maybe there's still something more for us to learn.

The younger son's request to his father is outrageous. It's breathtakingly insulting to his father, who is a village elder and landowner of substantial wealth. There has never been a custom in middle eastern villages for a son to receive his inheritance while his father is living. It's barely possible if the father becomes incapacitated, but even then only on the strict understanding that the son cannot dispose of the property while his father is still alive. Yet here, with a healthy father, the son asks for his share of the inheritance and for the right to dispose of it. Unheard of! In effect he is saying he wishes his father dead, a dreadful insult.

Jesus' listeners would have expected an explosive response from the father. Such an insult demands punishment. But the father agrees! He doesn't argue, he doesn't plead, he doesn't punish, he doesn't reject. Deep love grants the freedom to the beloved to reject. What quality of love is this.

Now the hidden participants in this story are the people of the village. They, the local community, would be outraged to hear what's going on. Not only has the son insulted his father but he's selling the family's ancestral land. Both actions fly in the face of middle eastern village custom. Note for later in the story that the village is grossly offended by this young man, they are probably pleased to see the back of him.

So the son goes off. He wastes the inheritance he's cashed in, and he's left in the awful position of feeding pigs, animals he'd normally never come close to, for they are unclean.

He hatches a plan (vs. 17-19). He'll return home and acknowledge his fault and offer to become a hired servant. Now friends, we usually think of this as a humble and full repentance, but it's not quite that. There were two grades of servants lower than that of a hired servant, which is really just an employee, a day labourer. Bondsmen and slave are lower. As a hired servant he would remain free, he wouldn't have to live cheek by jowl with his father and brother, he wouldn't be scrounging off his father, he'd be earning his living. Not a deep repentance.

Now comes the first most astonishing moment in this story. The father has been waiting and waiting and hoping for his son's return. He loves him. He knows the village people are likely to be hostile to his son, especially if they perceive that the son has wasted his inheritance. They might

well do him harm before he arrives at his father's house. So the father, wanting to protect his son and to welcome him home, watches, watches, waits. When he spots his son in the distance he runs - runs! For a long-robed village elder to run in public, through the village, is not only undignified but is humiliating. This father makes the reconciliation public, it's out in the open, he runs, filled with compassion, embraces and kisses his son. And he gives, in public, instructions for honour to be shown to his son and for a village feast of celebration. Absolutely astonishing. Killing the fatted calf means a feast for more than a hundred people, it's for the whole village not just a family celebration. The father is putting right the son's community and social relationships as well as his family relationships.

Then note the son's reaction. He is overwhelmed by his father's love. In verse 21 he confesses his sinfulness to his father - but he doesn't go on with his planned request to become a hired servant. He accepts his father's gift of love, his father's embrace, his father's gift of restoration, his father's self-humbling amazing grace.

Now the older son comes back into the story. We often feel sympathy for him, feeling he's the victim of his younger brother's greed. But wait - when his brother asked for his share of the inheritance, the older brother behaved very badly. His relationship with his father is wanting too. He should have been scandalised by his brother's request, middle eastern culture obliged him to try and act as a reconciler between his brother and his father. But he did nothing. In fact he accepted his share of the property too, albeit that he didn't sell it but stayed there with his father in what must have been a rather uneasy family and community relationship, for this older son had behaved quite inconsistently with family and community expectations of a first-born son.

When the older brother hears his younger brother has returned home and father is throwing a village party for him, he refuses to join in. What an insult to his father! He shows himself to be self-centred, greedy, contemptuous of his father's values and the cultural expectations upon him. At a village feast given by his father, he, the older brother, should be in there taking a high place of honour.

Now comes the second most astonishing moment in the story. The father accepts another public humiliation, he leaves the party and goes out to his son. Unheard of! Again Jesus' listeners would have expected anger, punishment, discipline - but the father goes out and pleads with his older son. The son's reaction is terrible. See how in verse 29 he gives no title of honour to his father in speaking with him, but shouts angrily at him, he calls his brother "this son of yours" denying his brotherhood with him. He shows himself to be interested only in his cronies, not in his family nor in his village. See his bitterness, his half-truths, his inability to confess that he has done wrong to his father as well. And how does his father respond to this bitterness and contempt? With more love. In verse 31 he addresses his son tenderly "Son, you are always with me, all that is mine is yours". The father simply pours out more love, more compassion, towards his older son this time.

And there the parable ends. We are left hanging. Did the older son come round? What might be his final response?

What a picture of the love of God. In Jesus, God has run down our village street to welcome us home, humbling himself as a human being. We are called to be like the younger son, recognising our distancing of ourselves from God, returning in penitence and receiving God's gift of forgiveness, love, and joy. God's love, like that of the prodigal's father, is here waiting for us.

To the glory of God. Amen.

Luke 15.11-32 The parable of the Prodigal and his brother

11 Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' " ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." ²²But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

25 'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" ³¹Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But 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."