

“Prodigal Son - again”

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10 March 2013 Luke 15:11-32

Well, here we are again – contemplating one of the greatest stories ever told, the parable of the Prodigal Son. This magnificent story from Jesus is awe-inspiring in its depiction of the unconditional love of God, a love full of patience and persistence; in showing us the extraordinary grace of God in God’s constant willingness to forgive; and in holding before us God’s desire for us to all to live in peaceful harmonious relationships within our families and in our communities. You’ve heard it all before!

This morning I want to highlight just a few of the less well-known images and learnings from the parable, and to ponder two “missing pieces”. You have the text provided, with a few notes below. Six points to share with you today.

1. I’ve underlined three portions of the text. In each of these the father responds to his two sons with amazing humility, generosity and heart-wrenching love. First he acquiesces in his younger son’s request for his share of the estate. In effect the son is saying “I wish you were dead, father, let me have my share of your estate now”. The father does not argue, he accepts this awful humiliation, in love. Second, when the son reappears, destitute and desperate, the father, who’s been waiting all along to see his son again, runs to greet his son and before the son can say anything he throws his arms around him and kisses him. And all this happens in public view – again the father willing to humiliate himself for the sake of love. And thirdly, when his older son is resentful and angry, the father leaves the party which he is hosting and goes out to plead with him – more humiliation, more humbling of himself for the sake of love, for the sake of family. What a portrait of God’s grace, God’s self-giving, God’s complete unmitigated love.
2. Now to the text which is bold. See here how the father restores his son not just to his place in the family but also to his place in the community. The father has just run in public view – unheard of on the part of a Middle Eastern ancestral landowner – to greet his lost son. Then he throws a party for the whole village and shows the whole community that his son is back, is welcome, and that his son, dressed in the family’s best clothing and adorned with ring and sandals, is to be treated again as a leading member of the village. It’s primarily the fatted calf that gives away what the father us up to here. A fatted calf means a feast for the whole village, for around 150 people, it’s not just a family or household dinner, this is a village celebration.
3. Now to the italics. We usually feel a great deal of sympathy for the older brother, in the circumstances we can identify with the older brother’s resentment at what is happening. But a more careful look at the story tells us the older brother’s relationship with his father is not right either. When the younger son asked for his share of the property and the father gave it, the older son said and did nothing – yet culturally the older son should have been in there seeking to dissuade his brother from his dreadful request and seeking to heal the broken relationship between his father and his brother. But he did nothing. He even accepted his share of the estate, albeit that he stayed on the property and didn’t cash it in. Then his refusal to join the party and his angry words to his father – not even addressing him as Father – are deliberately insulting towards his father. His family relationships are also defective.
4. Then two missing pieces. First, where’s Mum? As one of our Lenten study groups during the week concluded, she was no doubt stuck in the kitchen organising the big

party! It's tempting to suggest that the lack of females in the story may be reason for the very poor family relationships, as there's truth in recognising women are often more committed to good relationships than are men. I think all we can say is that the story is well founded in the culture of Jesus' time, where women were largely regarded as property, second-class – although note that's not how Jesus treated women, just think of Mary and Martha of Bethany or Mary Magdalene and the many women who were among Jesus' followers. Plus, there was no International Women's Day back then, to correct our sexism.

5. And the other missing piece is the story's ending. What happens with the older son? We're left up in the air. The lack of conclusion leaves us wondering, and in fact forces us to put ourselves in the story. How would I react to the father's pleading? What picture am I given of the nature of God here? How do I respond to God's invitation to be part of God's loved and loving family?
6. And lastly, note that at the beginning of Luke 15, we're told the audience for this parable includes both tax-collectors and sinners and Pharisees and scribes. The tax-collectors and sinners must have loved this story, if they could bring themselves to believe that God's love and forgiveness are like that of the father. How their hearts must have been lifted by Jesus. But the Pharisees and scribes would have become even more grumpy with Jesus – the God Jesus depicts in the story breaks all the rules, there's no eye for eye and tooth for tooth here, there's no keeping to tradition and convention. God's love transcends all else.

A beautiful beautiful story. Ponder it again later today. And see again God's astonishing love, and receive for yourself and for your family.

To the glory of God, Amen.