

“Kill the fatted calf...”
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32; Psalm 34:1-8

All parents live through their children. Most of us would quickly disagree with this. We want to say, “No, we live our own lives and they live theirs.” But deep down, we know that is not true. Our existences are intertwined with theirs.

For instance, when your child has a solo in the church’s children’s Christmas pageant, who is more nervous, you or your daughter? Remember, since I’m sitting up here, I can see you. So, I know it is you.

Who is more excited when your child makes the winning basket at a church basketball game, you or your son? You.

Who is more distraught over referee calls, the children or parents? By far, the parents.

When your daughter gets selected for the soccer all star team, who can hardly wait to call Grandma and Grandpa? You, the parent.

When your son or daughter gets into the college of their choice, does well on the SAT, wins a scholarship, graduates with honors, is all state in choir, who prays that someone will ask the question that allows you to tastefully make everyone aware of their achievement? You, the parent.

But the converse of this is also true, when things go awry, we also live through our children. When events do not go well in school, relationships, sporting events, employment, we share their pain, their disappointment and sometimes their embarrassment.

The parable most often called “The Prodigal Son” is likely the best known of all Jesus’ parables. We love the idea that God welcomes back sinners like us. But if we wish to hear the parable as did Jesus’ listeners, we must absorb it as a parent, as the *father* in the story, and not the son. The father is the main character, and to completely grasp what Jesus is telling us, we need to recognize how bad the younger son was and how good the older one was. Otherwise, we must feel the actions of the sons like we do our own children or other family members, and only then can we fully understand what Jesus is telling us.

Now, most of us quickly summarize the path of the younger son as he took his inheritance and went to New York City and spent it on wine, women, and song. But Jesus’ first listeners would have immediately picked up on clues that far more completely explained the pain and humiliation the son’s actions brought to the father.

For instance, asking for his inheritance early meant the son was saying to the father, “I can’t wait for you to die.” This would have been an unusual and extraordinary request. At its heart, it said to the father, “I want to be as far away from you as possible. I don’t want you watching me or telling me what to do. I want to be completely separate from your will and influence.” Otherwise, “give me your money and leave me alone.”

And, verse twelve says, the father “divided his property between” the sons. But remember, the New Testament was originally written in Greek. And what the Greek literally says is, the father divided “his life” between them. It alerts us to what the giving of the inheritance really meant in the heart and soul of the father.

Now, according to Jewish law, a younger son would receive one third of the father’s goods and holdings. To go elsewhere and start again meant the younger son had to sell the property. At this time, Israel was a land based economy. Families considered their property to be God’s gift to them. To sell it, as the younger brother did, broke financial, social and religious taboos. He sold part of the family’s legacy, their heirlooms, their spiritual connection just so he could get away from his father. And, when he sold this property, he significantly decreased the family’s present wealth, and their ability to build wealth for their future. Therefore, he harmed the family’s, his father’s, present and future financial security.

Well, the younger son takes his inheritance and moves to another country. The scripture says he squandered it in dissolute living. We don’t really know what that means. It is the elder brother who characterizes the inheritance as being devoured by prostitutes. Whether this is true, or it was bad business deals, or unwise investments, or all of the above, we don’t know. But he was obviously living large, and foolishly, a fact that no doubt was known to the father, and everyone else in town.

Then, famine strikes, and the son is broke. Desperate, he hires himself out to feed pigs. For Jews, pork, or anything to do with it, was forbidden. Caring for pigs was considered the lowliest of occupations. Jewish law said: “Cursed is he who feeds swine.” To feed pigs was to become like a non Jew, to forsake your heritage and faith. The social, and religious, shame of this for the son, and the father, is almost beyond belief.

And notice what the end of verse sixteen says, “and no one gave him anything.” All those friends who swarmed around him when his wallet was flush have disappeared. They have abandoned him, turned their backs on him.

Now, reading this story from the father’s point of view, understanding what it would feel like as the parent of this son, we can recall the sense of rejection, the hurt, the anger, the humiliation the father not only felt, but was aware that everyone else in the family, his circle of friends, the entire town also knew. The fair thing, most would argue, the right thing to do, was to teach the son a lesson he desperately needed to learn. He had financially harmed the family, maybe irreparably. He has broken the laws of their faith, from his treatment of the father to his unclean living and occupation. He has brought shame and humiliation to his father, his brother, even his synagogue.

One evening a little girl watched her parents dress for a party. When she saw her dad donning his tuxedo, she warned, “Daddy, you shouldn’t wear that suit.”

“And why not, darling?” he asked.

“Because, Daddy,” she replied, “you know that it always gives you a headache in the morning.”

The younger son knew that donning the suit of a son demanding his inheritance would create a huge headache for his father. But he did it anyway.

Just as we forget how bad the younger son was, we usually overlook how good the elder one had been. When reading the parable, we quickly focus on the elder son’s self-righteousness and unforgiving spirit. But take this scenario out of Jesus’ mouth and put it in our own lives and we will see the elder brother in an entirely different light. Let’s face it, the elder son had a point.

All the time his younger brother was throwing away money and disgracing the family name, the elder son was tirelessly working to keep the family business alive. The younger son’s selling of a third of the family property likely made this much more difficult. His brother’s fun only made more work for the brother who stayed home trying to put the family business back together again.

Look what the older brother tells us about himself:

“...I have been working like a slave...”

“...I never disobeyed your command...”

“...you never gave me even a goat to celebrate...”

Think about it from the elder son’s point of view. He stayed home to clean up the mess made by his younger brother. He was obedient, trustworthy, a tireless worker and good businessman. He didn’t ask for anything, and most importantly, has not done anything to embarrass the family. We can say the elder brother performed his years of work as a resented duty instead of a loving service. No question that he doesn’t display any sympathy or love for his younger brother. But look at it from the elder brother’s side. What is really fair here? Who should really be getting the ring, robe, and fatted calf? Shouldn’t it be the son who stayed loyal, who worked like a dog day after day, who upheld the family name and tradition?

A missionary from Brazil was giving a minute for mission at a Presbyterian Church here in the South when she mentioned the problems she had at the mission church with a particularly mischievous little boy. With these words, a grandmother in the congregation leaned forward and glared at her grandson. Whereupon, he responded, “Don’t look at me! I’ve never been to Brazil!”

The elder son expected the father to overlook his self righteousness and note that he had never been to Brazil, or whatever foreign country his younger brother visited.

Now, if we can realize how bad the younger son was, how he belittled, humiliated and harmed his father personally, financially, socially, and religiously, then we begin to see the radical nature of God’s love and forgiveness. God’s love and forgiveness, what we call grace, offends our sense of fairness. It is welcoming

back, celebrating the return of someone who in no sense deserves to be forgiven, much less welcomed as a son with all its rights and privileges.

But that is exactly how God greets us when we, like the younger son in the pig pen in verse seventeen, come to ourselves. Recognizing our sin, we fall onto the mercy of Almighty God, who through Jesus, reaches down and welcomes us home just like a full fledged son or daughter.

But, the second part of this parable is just as important, maybe more important, to those of us here today. Jesus told this parable because the religious leaders, the good church people of the day, were complaining that Jesus not only welcomed sinners, but ate with them, which in first century Israel denoted a friendship, a close relationship. Like the elder brother, these religious leaders were obeying God's law, doing His work, unlike these tax collectors and sinners. Remember, the religious leaders were absolutely correct about the tax collectors and sinners. The term sinner means their offenses got them thrown out of the synagogues. They were liars, cheaters, thieves. And tax collectors were the scum of the earth. Working with the Romans, they cheated and took advantage of hard working people to make themselves rich.

So, the religious leaders saw Jesus' welcoming of these people as condoning what they had done. But notice the father in the parable welcomes and goes out to meet both sons. Though their sins were different, both brothers were sinners. One through dissolute living, and one through self righteousness and selfishness. And Jesus says God welcomes, searches out, bestows sonship on both. And those of us who follow Jesus are to do the exact same thing. Thank goodness, God is not fair, or everyone of us would be in trouble.

Carol Pagelsen, from First Presbyterian Church in Myrtle Beach told a story from when she was, as she described herself, a smart aleck teenager. She was listening to her great aunt rail against demon alcohol, when she decided to quickly remind her aunt of Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine. Her aunt responded, "I know, and I would have thought a heap more of Jesus if he hadn't done that."

It is so easy to fall into the trap of evaluating others by *our* concerns, instead of those of Jesus.

This morning, how do you and I reach out to fellow sinners? Do we invite others to faith with *our* rules and regulations, *our* sense of fairness?

Or, do we respond as God does, with rings and robes and fatted calves? As a church full of elder brothers, do we also "kill the fatted calf" for the "prodigal"?

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