

Sunday, July 24, 2022

An Incomprehensible Community

(Series: "Stories of Jesus" – The Lost Older Son)

(Message Six)

(Luke 15:25-32)

Scripture: Luke 15:11-32

¹¹Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

Today's Focus:

²⁵"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' ³¹"My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Message:

There is an old story of a teacher telling the story of the prodigal son to her Sunday School class. Midway through the story, she says to her students, "But there is one for whom the return of the prodigal son brought no joy or celebration. There is one who experiences only disappointment and bitterness and resentment. Does anyone know who that was?"

A student raises his hand and says, "The fattened calf." (Okay, so there are two.)'

Last week we started talking about Jesus' story of a father with two sons – two lost sons – the third lost-and-found story he tells in response to criticism from the Pharisees that he is dining with tax collectors and sinners. (cf. 15:1)

Jesus' eating and drinking with "sinners" was not only revolutionary, but it was also **incomprehensible**. No one would openly dine with known sinners and the Pharisees criticized Jesus for it. This prompted Jesus to tell three stories; this part of the third story reveals Jesus' primary reason for telling all three stories.

We talked last week about the younger son (**15:11-24**), a prodigal, demands his **inheritance** while his dad was still alive, frivolously **wastes** it and ends up feeding pigs. When he realized he'd be better off as a hired hand for his father, he headed for **home**. While he was still **far off**, his father runs to him, welcomes him back as a son, and throws a **party**!

But this parable, contrary to common understanding, is not so much directed toward the downtrodden and marginalized (younger) son as it is to the older son. The older son - who represents those who **chafe** at the radical message of God's **unconditional** love toward really despicable sinners - is the **climax** of all three of these stories. The older son represents that part of us that is not comfortable with God's unconditional love for others (or even for ourselves).

This morning we'll focus on the Sunday School teacher's assumed answer – the older brother (**15:24-32**).

This parable also uses a chiastic structure with four parts repeated in inverse order for a total of eight points:

- (1) He comes. *He came near the house...* (Luke 15:25)
- (2) Your brother is safe. *Your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf.* (15:27)
- (3) A Father comes to reconcile. *His father came out and pleaded with him.* (Luke 15:28)
- (4) Complaint I – How you treat me. *I have served you and you never gave me a kid.* (15:29)
- (4) Complaint II – How you treat him. *But when this son of yours comes home, you kill the fatted calf for him.* (15:30)
- (3) A Father tries to reconcile. *You are always with me. Everything I have is yours.* (15:31)
- (2) Your brother is safe. *Your brother was dead and is alive!* (15:32)
- (1) He comes. *He came and entered the house and joined in. And the two sons were reconciled to their father.* (This part is missing from the text.)

(Let's get started!)

THE STORY

(1) He comes. *He came near the house...* (Luke 15:25-26)

This part of the story opens with the oldest brother coming in from the **fields** after a long day of hard work. As he nears the house, he hears music, singing and dancing. He remains **outside** the house. His path to the banquet hall parallels his brothers.

This is the brother who always kept his room picked up, always played by the rules, and always paid his dues. His resume? Impeccable. His credit? Squeaky clean. His loyalty? He stayed when his brother left. He is the responsible, respectable, and deserving brother.

Until now the Pharisees have remained comfortably outside the story, passing judgment on the young sinner, his spineless father, and on Jesus as he tells the story. But Jesus now turns the tables. People like his accusers are now put under the microscope.

On the surface, this older son appears to us western listeners/readers to be a **model son**. He is **not**!

In middle eastern culture, the oldest son was expected to step up and mediate in a family crisis. When his brother demanded his inheritance, it was the older brother's responsibility to assure his father his brother didn't really want him dead; to assure his father he would handle it, and then to set his brother straight and get him to apologize to their father. But he had abdicated his responsibilities. He stood by as his father divided the estate (fact is, he got

his two-thirds of the estate in the division). The unity of the family was dissolving and being destroyed, and he did nothing about it!

Question: Why hadn't someone gone to the field that day to tell him his brother had returned, had been reconciled to his father, and there was a celebration about to begin?

Answer: Because everyone already knew his response. They knew his relationship with his father wasn't right. (Remember, it's a small village.)

For all of his compliance in doing the right things, his **heart** wasn't where it **belonged**; like his little brother, he cared primarily about himself.

(2) Your brother is **safe. *He's come home. Your father has killed the fattened calf (15:27)***

When the older brother asks what is going on, he is told that his *former* young brother (remember he is dead to him) had the gall to come home. And then, even worse, his father has not only received his prodigal (sinful) brother back, but he had also ordered the fattened calf killed. And now his father was about to sit down and eat with him.

This is precisely the same compliant the Pharisees had against Jesus. **(15:1)** Remember? He eats with sinners! (Surely his younger brother qualified!)

When the elder brother learns what is happening, he becomes angry. He **refuses** to go in and join the party and eat with **sinners** (he, after all, is righteous!). In refusing, he provides a very public insulting vote of no confidence in his father's actions.

In Jesus' day, the oldest son had social obligations to serve as host with his father at a (all) public family celebrations like this. He was to greet guests and make sure everyone had enough to eat and drink. Hosting was a serious obligation.

He would also be expected to go in and publicly embrace his brother, welcome him back, and graciously accept the guests compliments on how wonderful it was that his brother was back. He didn't even go in.

In Jesus day, if a son had differences or issues with his father, he was expected to settle them in private after the gathering. Inside, he airs his differences in public view shaming his father.

When Jesus says, "*The older brother refused to go in,*" his audience would have been shocked. This son deliberately chooses to publicly **insult** and **humiliate** his father. He can't accept or show any joy over the grace his father has extended to his younger brother. His brother's restoration without any apparent restitution or punishment is incomprehensible to him. His heart is bitter; he won't go in.

For years he has dutifully obeyed and served his father as was expected. Why should his brother be given grace, mercy or blessing when he messed up big time?

He, the obedient son, is the one who deserves grace. (Catch the irony?)

This should have resonated with the Pharisees and teachers of the law who are listening. They labored their whole lives to be respectable and earn God's favor, and yet it was the tax collectors and sinners this rabbi was eating with. How fair is that?!

Why should a "sinner" who squandered both his share of the **inheritance** and his position in the **family** be welcomed back and made an **heir** again? Grace should be given to those who earn it – to the good guys who deserve it – not to undeserving, incompetent, wasteful, disrespectful, ungrateful sinners!

(3) A father comes to **reconcile. *He comes out and pleads with his son.* (15:28)**

The oldest son is angry. It's not hard to see why. His brother wished his father dead, took his inheritance, squandered it all, and now Dad throws him a big party. The big brother feels like he is the victim of **injustice**. He sits outside and pouts. It's just not **fair**!

He focuses on what he doesn't have instead of on what he has. The youngest son spent time in the pigpen of rebellion; the oldest son now spends time in the pigpen of self-pity. The young one has come home; the old one is still in the slop. The break between the oldest son and his father is as radical as the break between the younger son and his father was.

So the insulted father **leaves** the celebration to contend with a second defiant son.

Understand, a middle eastern father does not plead with his children. With total authority over his children, he could simply have his son beaten for his insolence. Jesus' listeners would have considered that most appropriate.

He could have ordered, forced, his son to attend the celebration. And because he was usually obedient, he likely would have.

But once again the father offers a public demonstration of his suffering love by **pleading** with his son. This father does not want another hired servant; he is not looking for a slave. As with his youngest, he wants a **son** (or daughter). So he offers love, grace, and forgiveness. He wants his son to notice. And he hopes his son might be willing to do the same.

God does not want **formal obedience**; he wants a right heart that leads to right living. The Father knows you can't force a **right heart**; he knows a father-son (father-daughter) relationship must be built on love, grace, and

forgiveness. The older son has none of these. All his efforts (and ours) to do things right cannot make us right with the father. Only grace's unmerited forgiveness and acceptance make us right with God.

So in humble love rather than judgment, he offers his oldest son the same grace he offered his youngest son.

(4) Complaint I – How you treat me. *I've served [lit. been a slave for you] you and you never even gave me a goat. (15:29)*

When his father comes out to meet him, he just starts listing the **atrocities** of his life.

Notice this son does not address his father as "**father**" like even his brother did; this son has long seen himself as a servant, not as a "son." Titles of honor were very important in that day. Even the younger son addressed him as "father" when he asked for his share of the inheritance.

The older son speaks to his father with no respect and quickly launches into his complaint with a vicious tone: *How dare you offer grace to my sinful, dead, brother!*

To hear his litany, his woes began the day he was born: "*I have served you like a slave; I never disobeyed a single command!*" (Except he just did; he just **ignored** his father's invitation to the banquet. Then he **humiliated** his father publicly. Then he **defied** his father's deepest wish that he would accept his lost brother. In Jesus' day, this was a grievous sin.)

He admits all his years of obedience and service to his father were just grim duty and obligation; he was just going through the motions; there was no love in it. (Simply doing the right things and following the rules as best we can doesn't make us right with God; and yet, our assumption that we "*have never disobeyed a single command*" will keep us from God if we don't love him.)

The elder brother offers no more love and respect for his father than the younger brother offered when he impetuously left home.

Because the oldest son has been good, he figures his father **owes him**: "You treated me poorly. I deserve better. You never even gave me a goat! My young ungrateful brother gets a fattened calf!"

(4) Complaint II – How you treat him. *But when this son of yours comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him. (15:30)*

When this *son of yours* – he refuses to call him his brother - who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home (pure speculation on his part; he doesn't know, he wasn't there; his brother didn't tell him), you kill the fattened calf. He accuses his father of **favoritism**.

Again, this older brother is just as distant, just as **lost**, just as **alienated** from the father as his younger brother once was; and he is still “outside” the home.

Only the difference is the elder brother doesn’t realize it. He doesn’t realize in his **self-righteousness**, i.e., in rejecting his father’s **grace** – the same grace granted to his younger brother, the elder brother is actually condemning himself.

He should have celebrated his father’s kindness and grace, because he too stands in need of his father’s kindness and grace.

Those who scorn grace shut themselves off from the very thing that every human being needs so desperately. The Pharisees’ anger with Jesus for receiving and gracing sinners sealed their own condemnation.

(3) A father tries to reconcile. You’re always with me. Everything I have is yours. (15:31)

The father is expected to be **furious** with his son; but instead, he offers a **tender** response to the son’s insolence and insults.

He addresses his son with an affectionate title: “*My son, you are always with me; everything I have is yours.*” The usual Greek word for son is *huios*; Jesus uses “*teknon*,” an intimate word for *child*.

The son who refuses to call his father, “father,” is called “my dear child” by his father. For the father, the servant category is inappropriate for their relationship: he is a son, an heir, everything is already his!

There is no **judgment**, no criticism, no **rejection**, only an outpouring of love. The father is saying is, “*Don’t you realize that to live at home with me, to live in my love, to share my life with me, is the single greatest gift one could have.*” This is no ordinary father.

Jesus is highlighting the real issue we have with **grace**: we don’t **like** it. It doesn’t seem **fair**. It contradicts our performance-based-acceptance narrative.” There should be some extra credit for being good, otherwise, why do it!? Otherwise, it doesn’t make any sense!

Meanwhile Jesus is **pleading** with us: “*Please, don’t turn your back on my unlimited grace and my Father’s inexhaustible and unquenchable love. You too need it! You too have messed up! Accept my offer. Be part of my family.*”

For the older brother and everyone like him, there is only one thing that separates us from God – and it is not our sin (the prodigal was the definition of sin and the father embraced him, kissed him, robed him, and threw a party).

No, it is our self-righteousness that keeps us from God. God doesn’t swivel his chair away from us because of self-righteousness, we swivel our chair

away from God! It is not our **sin** that continues to separate us from God, it is our **self-righteous** refusal to accept his grace.

(2) Your brother is **safe. *Your brother was dead and is alive!* (15:32)**

The father reminds his son that the **return** of his brother is cause for **celebration** and joy!

Jesus is saying to the Pharisees (and everyone who is self-righteous), “When you see tax collectors and sinners (thieves, prostitutes, blasphemers, etc.) coming to Jesus, you should rejoice. They were dead. In me, they are alive by grace. You should rejoice! Instead, you grumble.”

We need to decide whether we will accept that God welcomes sinners by grace and grace alone (including us) and share in the joy. The Pharisees refused.

Sadly, I – and in fact, most of us – are more like the Pharisees than the prodigal.

The father’s speech is neither an **apology** for the banquet or a **reproach** toward the older brother, but a cry from his heart for his oldest son, for all his sons and daughters, to embrace grace. This is your brother who has come home...

(1) He **comes. *He came and entered the house and joined in. And the two sons were reconciled to the father.* (This part is missing from the text.,)**

Jesus intentionally does not provide a summary **conclusion** to this fourth story. (The first three all have the same structure: lost, search, found, celebration.) But this story has no **closure**, no full **celebration**. The younger prodigal, the family sinner, is now inside the home and the older brother, the “good” son, still remains outside.

We are never told if the older brother allows himself to be found and ultimately participates in the celebration party. Meanwhile, the father continues to wait – as he did for his young son.

A story without an ending invites the listener or reader to **provide** an **ending**.

Each succeeding story in this chapter has tightened the focus. From one in one hundred, to one in ten, to one in two. It is now one in one. All eyes are on the one remaining **son**. Jesus stops talking. The story is done—or is it? Silence. Waiting.

What becomes of this final **lost one**? Isn’t Jesus going to finish the story? The silence slowly develops suspense. The silence becomes **uncomfortable**, then unbearable, then **seismic**. Suffering love **waits**. Waiting is hard. The Father waits.

Imagine, one of the murmurers – a Pharisee? A teacher of the law? – says, “I’m that brother! That’s me! I was lost! I am found! The Father has welcomed me home!”

And then another murmurer, and another, and another as the earth shifts under their feet and their self-righteousness begins to crumble. Each person must be found – because every person is lost.

One after another they abandon their secure, self-defined, crowd-approved status as *righteous* and join the family of the lost and found. They finish Jesus’ story celebrating with friends and neighbors...and angels. No more murmuring. They are found. They are finally home.

The regular church goer, a righteous one, who has lost all sense of being lost and thought only of himself/herself as looking for the lost, finally realizes they too must be found. They too need grace.

Will the older son *change* his mind? Will he join the *celebration*? Will the father’s waiting and *suffering* come to an end? Will the *harmony* of the family be restored? Will you come home? Will *you* be present at the party?

Prayer:

Father, we give you thanks and praise, that while we were stubborn and self-righteousness, you left the celebration of heaven, and in Jesus Christ provided a way for us to come home and pleaded with us to accept his love and grace as the only way to come home and be with you. Thank you for welcoming us as sons and daughters instead of hired hands and servants. Thank you that in Christ, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of your grace that you have lavished on us. (cf. Ephesians 1:7,8). In the name of Jesus our Teacher and Rabbi, Amen.

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