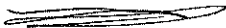


Our Gospel text for today is probably one of the most well-known of Jesus' parables, maybe even of any Bible story. It is so well-known and well-loved that one has to be a little careful. To start with, it is one of the few times Jesus uses "family" as the basis for a parable. Usually it is plants or animals or masters and slaves. Since everybody has their own family, this parable can become the blank screen on which people project what they knew, or wish they would have known, in their family. To make matters worse, we pastors have a bad habit of being oblivious to all the various experiences different people listening to our sermons might have had along the way.

What does this parable sound like, for example, to the person who got kicked out of their home for their sexual orientation or their gender identity? How does it come across to the person who ran away from an abusive home, or severed ties with a toxic situation? What sense does this parable make to the child whose father was absent, either because he abandoned them, or was unjustly incarcerated? Sooo, I think I should go lightly, and since Jesus is usually telling truths that surprise us, let's look for the surprises and see what they have to tell us.

 Story starts out with the younger brother asking to have his inheritance and then leaving shortly after. This is actually not so surprising. Sometimes this story is told as if that was the younger son's big sin. And while it may not have been what a father might have wanted, this sort of thing happened often enough there were procedures for it. It would have been what Abraham did when he left Haran to go to the land that God was going to show him. Immigrants everywhere and throughout history have done this sort of thing. Seeking one's fortunes elsewhere, come what may.

So, the younger son heads out with his share, one-third of his father's fortune (since the eldest son gets a 2X share). But, he scatters the fortune with dissolute living. He was living it up. Whatever were his big dreams, they didn't work out so hot. To make matters worse, a famine came. He got a menial job, but no one would even give him a handout such that the pea pods the pigs ate were looking good. This is not surprising. This kind of thing happens all the time. Bad choices and worse luck.

We Americans, descendants of the Puritans blame the whole deal on the young man's dissolute living. I heard a Biblical scholar once tell about how, in St. Petersburg Russia, the blame is placed on the famine. In Africa, (Tanzania maybe) the blame is placed on the stingy people of the far off country who won't share anything with him. Whatever the case, he realizes he has one other option; he can go home, he can see if

Dad would let him just be a hired hand. He has no right to anything. He knows he has used that up. But at least he would have food to eat. There is nothing much surprising here lot's of people do things they wouldn't otherwise do except they have to to survive. People trade status for survival all the time. So off the son goes, heading home, rehearsing his speech all the way.

Next we come to the father, which the text tells us "While [the son] was still far off, his father saw him." It's hard to say if this was surprising or not. Who knows. Maybe the dad was hurt by his son's decision to leave. Maybe he was even insulted and turned his back on his son as the son headed down the road that lead him away from home. But maybe as the days turned into weeks, and weeks to months or years, the dad's gaze went to the horizon more and more often, scanning the horizon with wishful thinking, hoping against hope. Maybe never really expecting to see the son, but unable to stop looking for him anyway. Any chance there might have been some regrets on the father's part: regretting some unkind final words, or coldness as the son departed? Who's to say?

What we do know is that the father was looking off down the road often enough when, the day the son did return home, the father saw him while he was still far off. And before I go any further I have to point out that most depictions of this next scene get it wrong, wrong wrong. The most famous artwork is probably a painting by Rembrandt where the suitably penitent son in his tattered rags is kneeling at the feet of the father, who is seated and opulently robed, surrounded by servants, the elder brother lurking beyond. That's not what the text says. What the text actually says is way more surprising than that.

The father saw his son while he was still far all and "was filled with compassion" This is the lamest translation. The Greek work is *ἔσπλαγχνίζομαι* which is related to the stirring of one's entrails, the seat of deep emotion. So it would be more like it says "the father's whole insides were bursting with love" and "he ran". The father (an old guy, more like a grandfather probably, hoisted himself up as far as his old body would let him, he hitched up his robes and HE RAN to down the road to his son. Where the text tells us he "put his arms around him and kissed him." That son didn't get any chance to kneel and give his groveling "I'm sorry, Dad" speech. The dad's love for his son got the first move. The only move that really mattered.

And it didn't stop there, Before the son could even finish his speech, the day had called for a robe, and a ring, and a feast of the fatted calf. No self-respecting patriarch would ever do that. Reward bad behavior? Never. How would a Father or a King or a

God ever keep people in line if he didn't punish bad behavior? God can't be that good.

I can almost imagine the crowd listening to this parable and laughing a little nervously. Maybe even the tax collectors and sinners among them thinking, "Wait a minute, If God is that loving, then who is going to punish the people that I think should be punished?" See how easily that happens, how easy it is to be the elder brother and have some folks you think ought not be treated so well or welcomed into God's love and forgiveness. It's almost scary.

But there is a second surprise in this parable And it has to do with that older brother. The feast is getting going and once the brother finds out it is for that no-good little brother, he is mad. And he is not coming to the party. So the dad, the host of the party by the way, comes out to him. A host leaves his own party. The dad goes and talks to the other son – who now is the one who is far off. This is how much God wants to be in relationship with us all. And how much God wants us all to be in relationship with each other.

God wants us to celebrate with and care for each other. No exceptions. No one is expendable. No one is outside of God's infinite grace. God's desire for us, for humankind, is not fulfilled until everyone, EVERYONE, is at the party, celebrating the feast of creation.

Now, that would be a perfectly good place to end this sermon. But we are living in such a divided and divisive time that I'm compelled to take this one more step. This is a parable to tell of God's love, that is true. But in all the parable there is almost always both a promise and a challenge. The promise is God's love for us. What is the challenge here? Maybe it is this question, "Who, who in the world as a whole, or in your world in particular, would it be the hardest for you to break bread with, to sit down and talk with, to be glad to see and spend time with?"

Me? If I'm honest, it is a toss-up. I don't think I could abide to be near the people I perceive to be in charge of some of the abhorrent decisions being made in our country right now. The news cycle has become wholly inadequate to keep before us the atrocities: children are still being detained, the incarceration industry is booming, the ACA is being played with, hate crimes are sky-rocketing, science is dismissed. But I don't think I could abide to be near people who support all those folks either. Then I realize, oh wait. I'm related to them. We've mostly just started to avoid each other. So, does this parable mean that God wants me to be in relationship with them?

There is a movie coming out this week that I really want to go see. It's "The Best of Enemies" and it's about how Ann Atwater, an African-descent woman in Durham, NC and C.P. Ellis a KKK leader worked together on the issue of school desegregation and how they eventually became friends. It makes me wonder if God knows that that kind of reconciliation is the only way anything is ever truly going to get better. How often are the fights we have with each other just distractions from working with each other for one another's well-being. The longer and more bitterly the less-powerful fight with each other, the less they are able to address the abuses by the powerful and privileged that keep the poor poor and the powerless powerless.

When Jesus spoke of God running to welcome home the prodigal son – instead of waiting in a more dignified way to mete out mercy to a sufficiently groveling penitent. Jesus was obliterating the schemes where power comes down from on high to people who tow the line, or repent sufficiently when they screw up and where God is just the tippy-top of that power from on high set-up.

Too much of the world is starving on the pea pods of judgment and exclusion, us and them, domination and violence. Into that world, Jesus told the story of a father who had two sons. But this parable ought to be called the Prodigal Father, a prodigal father who scatters love and forgiveness everywhere; on the deserving and undeserving alike. The Prodigal Father calls us all to come and feast, to feast on love, on forgiveness, on second chances, on the reconciliation in Christ that is big enough to include all of us.

God is calling us all, broken, hungry, longing for love – every single one of us. God is calling us all to come; to come home to love big enough for every one. TBTG Amen.