

## Roots Running Away

This has to be the most popular parable in all of scripture and one of the most popular stories in all the world. One of the reasons why this is such a popular story is because, even though we live 2,000 years from when this story was told, it still relates to many of our lives remarkably well. I mean (and I won't ask you to raise your hands) many of us live with dysfunctional families that look much like this one.

First, you have the sibling rivalry. The older sibling always thinks that the younger sibling is treated with kids' gloves. The next time my older sister comes to visit I invite you to ask her if I was treated any differently than her and she'll be more than happy to regale you about how much easier my life was and how it at least "appears" that I have been loved on more than she was.

Of course from a younger sibling's perspective I would say that the older sibling is well, kind of boring. Responsible living is just not that interesting, quite frankly. And just as we see in this story, the older siblings are more than happy to point out to you how much better they are than you and how he or she doesn't cause one's parents near as much grief as the younger child.

And then you have the view from the parents. The question that I always hear (and that already I have begun to hear myself say) is "How in the world could these kids with the exact same parents and raised virtually the same end up being so different?" Or how do you love a rebellious child without alienating the more responsible one?

So, it's really not surprising at all that so many of us relate to this story. And yet, as much as this story feels so contemporary, the reality is that because the context is so different than our own that there may be some things that we can overlook. Kenneth Bailey, a Presbyterian scholar who lived in the Middle East has been incredibly helpful to me in seeing some of these differences that might be easily overlooked by Americans living in 2015.

One of the things that he points out is that when the younger son asks for his inheritance, in that time and place, it would have been as if he was saying, "I wish you were dead." The reality is that the only inheritance most people had then was the land on which they lived and so the son is basically saying, "I wish you were dead so that I could have the land upon which you now reside." Bailey said he's had conversation after conversation with those in the communities in which he lived that would go like this. "Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?" Never. Could anyone ever make such a request? Impossible. And what would happen if they did? His father would beat him, of course. Why? This request means he wants his father to die.

Which is why it's remarkable to see that here at the very beginning we already see the father's willingness to be humiliated. Because, rather than saying "no" or beating him, he does it. He divides the property to both of his sons. The younger son apparently sells his part of that land (about 1/3) and he leaves his father. Not only is his father humiliated but he also willingly puts his own life at risk because he now has a 1/3 less security than he used to. It's like your pension or 401k or social

security being cut by a 1/3 and your child is the one who took it. In other words the father has jeopardized his own future, but he does so willingly.

But it's important to see that the son's action is not just an affront to the father but to the whole community. Community back then looked and acted much different than how our own sense of community usually works. It's similar to how I've heard folks a couple of generations ago talk about how, if a neighborhood child was acting up, a neighbor could spank the child and this was not considered odd in any way. There was a real sense that children were the responsibility of all. And so when the child treats his father in this way, it is as if he has treated the whole community in this way.

But the son, clearly not caring about this, leaves. Though he seems to be having a good time at first, as we all know that good time begins to crash dramatically. Before you know it he's doing the worst of the worst: working for a Gentile and feeding pigs. Until finally, we are told, he "comes to his senses" and so he comes up with a plan to return to his father. Now this "comes to his senses" is an interesting line because it's a bit ambiguous. The previous two parables both use the explicit word "repent," but this story does not. It makes one wonder whether coming to his senses is really repenting or if it's merely saying, "This stinks and I'll just go back now and eke out a better living at my dad's. In some ways, the whole story that the son comes up with almost seems a bit rehearsed, leaving us to wonder whether or not he is really sorry for what he's done or if he is just sorry that it didn't work out.

This was brought up at our staff meeting on Wednesday and it was pointed out that one could either be cynical and say that he's just sorry it didn't work out or one could say that he really is sorry even if it doesn't explicitly state it. My answer to that is to simply say yes. It seems to me there's good truth in admitting that our own motives are probably rarely pure as well as the fact that it's probably not ours to state whether other's repentance is genuine or not. It's also a great reminder that what's most important to see, of course, is the response of the father.

And what is the response of the father? Well, we're told that he sees the son while he is still far off and so he runs to him. As we mentioned last week running would have been completely inappropriate. Aristotle, in fact, said that "Great men never run in public." But even more than simply wanting to see him, Bailey says that this is an attempt to protect the son from the community.

It might be helpful to know that the farming community would be set up much differently than how farming communities around here are set up. Rather than having houses on each plot of farmland so that they are far apart from each other, all the houses were together and each day they would go out to their plot of land. So, when the son returns the community, not just the father, would see him coming. And the community, as I said earlier, would not have been pleased with the son. In fact they would probably wanted to beat him or worse. And so this picture of the father running to his son and throwing caution to the wind is not just because he missed him but because he needs to protect his son from the community, lest he be beat or killed or thrown out of the community forever.

And after he runs out and embraces the son, before the son can even finish his rehearsed lines, the father yells at his servant to bring him the best robe to put on the son. Of course, the best robe would have been whose? The father's. The ring and the sandals he orders is a way of showing that he's not merely a servant, but his son. And then, of course, he calls for the fatted calf. Now, whose fatted calf is it? Well, it's actually the older brother's right? The land has already been given to the elder son, but the father yells for it to be killed. As one of my seminary professor's once said, "It was probably his older son's prize-winning 4H cow" that is now being called to be slaughtered.

Now, as most of you know, that is a lot of cow. My father over the last few years has raised cows to be killed and I've been the recipient of maybe 1/16th of it and the meat just goes on and on. Now that's okay for us, because we have a deep freezer that we bought just to hold all that cow. But, of course, they didn't have freezers which means that the calf needs to be eaten quickly, meaning that it is not just for the father and his two sons or even the father and the rest of his family. It's for the whole community. In other words, this is a way for the father to try and reconcile his young, prodigal son with the whole community.

So, the party is in full thrust when the older brother, who not surprisingly has been out in the fields working, arrives on the scene. After hearing the music and dancing (this was no Presbyterian party) he is angry. And so he refuses to go into the party, which would have been yet one more embarrassing thing for the father. And yet again, the father steps away from the party (virtually unheard of in that time and place) in order to ask his son to come join the party. But, the older son will have none of it. After all I've done for you, slaving away all of these years and never disobeying you, and yet you throw this huge party for this brat of a son who wanted you dead and has squandered your property. Meanwhile, I (the one who has always obeyed you) can't even get a measly goat from you. To which the father says, "Son, everything I have is yours, but we had to celebrate because your brother, your brother, who was lost is now found." And thus marks the end of this remarkable story.

A story like this offers us so many lessons that it's difficult to not try and touch on everything. Oftentimes as children we tend to focus on the prodigal son and the reality that no matter what we've done that God continues to love us and longs to embrace us. In the Pentecostal church, we really focused on the prodigal son because there were so many in that church who had lived that wild kind of life before they had been found by Jesus.

But as I got older I looked more and more at the older brother, a character whom until then I had barely even noticed. He just seemed to be the ungrateful guy hanging out in the shadows who didn't want to have fun. But, of course, he is also the responsible one who may never have had a remarkable conversion experience but who, for as long as he can remember, has always been around the father. Oh, he's not perfect, but his story is a lot less exciting than the younger brother. He is, quite frankly, a Presbyterian.

Which is why this week as I thought about this story there were a couple of things that stood out to me. The first is, for those of us who have grown up in the faith or who were never the most wild and crazy of folks, we need to realize that grace will almost always be more than we think is fair and bigger than we think is possible. It's important to know our natural tendency will probably be to focus on what is fair, but when it comes to grace, nothing about it is fair. It is reckless and costly and oftentimes makes no sense, which of course is why it's grace. But I think that we who have grown up with the Father need to be aware that we will almost naturally downplay the reach and power of God's grace. For others, but quite honestly, for ourselves as well.

Which brings me to my second point which is that if you are an older brother it's good to know an affliction that we see affecting the older brother in the story is one that may affect you as well. We see it in how he describes his relationship with his father. What does he say? That he has slaved away for years for him. He sees himself as his father's slave, not as his father's son. In other words, what he is doing for his father is not in response to his father's love, but is in order, in hopes, of gaining it.

A few weeks ago someone who I held in incredibly high esteem, a mentor of sorts, passed away from pancreatic cancer. His name was Steve Hayner and he did some remarkable things while on earth. For one, he had an incredible impact on my life, through his incredible humility and his obvious love of the Lord. Beyond that, vocationally he did some remarkable things. He once headed up a college ministry at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle that grew from 17 when he started to over 1,200 before he left. He was president of Intervarsity Christian Fellowship for many years. He served as chairman of the board of International Justice Mission and on the boards of organizations like World Vision and Fuller Seminary.

After he was diagnosed with cancer around Easter he began to write in a diary of sorts which he shared virtually. He wrote with spectacular honesty about the depression he sometimes fell into, but also of the hope that came from his faith. As he said at one point, he wasn't all that afraid because, "I've been practicing my whole life for this." Steve grew up in the church and he was, minus the jerky part, an older brother. His funeral was last Monday at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, and I watched it online. It was a beautiful service, but one thing stopped me in my tracks completely. It was something his daughter, Emilie, said and it's something I'd like for you to watch. [Show video-46:25-48:10]

I was stunned, to be honest, that this man who did incredible things for God, who never strayed away in any grand fashion, who shaped thousands of people for Christ, who preached about grace and love again and again, and yet even then, it was difficult for him to embrace the reality that he had been embraced by God the Father, by God's love and his grace. Yet it speaks to me of the reality of just how hard it is for older brothers and sisters to really accept God's love deeply. We can talk about it and we know in our heads it is true but to live in that love is a real challenge.

So perhaps our lostness is revealed in the fact that we are so focused on fairness and being responsible that it is incredibly hard for us to genuinely believe that we don't have to "earn" our being found and loved by God. It's scandalous, this grace, and we are the sort who don't like scandals. And because of that while God tries to simply embrace us with his love we keep looking around and trying to get our arms free so that we can do some more work to feel like we've earned that love.

So, how do we begin to embrace this grace in deeper ways? Well, I suppose we could run away and live lives of debauchery for a while and then come back and experience God's grace, but that's probably not all that wise! No, I think it's a process bit by bit. We practice it when we take the Sabbath seriously, as we have discussed before. By not working, not doing, we are forced to remember that we can't earn things or grace, but rather we are given them by God.

We start understanding it more deeply when we come into worship with the lens that this is a party, a celebration of God's grace. I think that perhaps the reason we as Presbyterians sometimes struggle with having joyful worship is because we come as a people who think this is part of the work of earning God's love rather than the fact that this is a celebration about the fact that God's love is already with us.

And we grow in our understanding of God's grace and love when we start practicing abundant grace on others. When, as I said earlier, we treat others with more grace than we think they deserve or than is fair, we might just catch the vision of how God does so with us in even greater ways. To live like that cannot help but to begin to change how we understand and experience God's grace and love.

And now we are nourished in this understanding, crumb by crumb and drop by drop, when we partake, as we will this morning in the Lord's Supper. It is a symbol of the Christ who died for us, the God who runs to us, to protect us from others and even ourselves. Whether we have been gone for years or whether we can never remember being without him, in the bread and the cup we are embraced by his grace that is so much greater than we could ever imagine. So let us come and eat, wherever you are, whatever you've done, come to the table and join the celebration of God's love. Amen.