

The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family

Luke 15:11-32

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March 14, 2010

We can all relate to this story, because we all have weird families. Many of us have siblings, and we know what a pain that can be—especially when one is the “good child” and the other is the “bad child.” It’s tough on both.

In this family the mother is absent. Maybe she is dead. Maybe she is hiding in the next room, crying. Maybe she covers her head and is not allowed to speak. We don’t know. I think that’s because the focus of the story is how *God* relates to rebellious children and obedient children—he loves them both—he goes out to them at the cost of his dignity and honor—so it’s not useful to Jesus to include a mother. She would just confuse things. This is not a story about a real family. It’s a story about God.

By our standards, this family is completely dysfunctional. One son leaves home and comes home broke. He is enabled by his overly generous dad. The other son doesn’t speak to him. You know families like that.

But to Jesus’ first listeners, this father was far more outrageous than he seems to us. We’re used to the story, for one thing, but we also know dads who will take you back no matter what. Dads in our society pretty much have no honor to lose. We are a laughing-stock on TV. The best we can do is to hope for a little respect when our kids bottom out and discover they need us. So of course dad will take the bad son back.

But in Jesus’ world, the father was the patriarch. He ruled the family like a little kingdom. Think of the Godfather in the movies. To Jesus’ hearers, this parable is a story about a *weak* patriarch who is unable to control either of his sons—and he is willing to sacrifice his honor to keep his family and his community together. He is a father who does not take his stand on being right. What he wants is reconciliation. He wants the younger son reconciled to the family and to the village. He wants the older son reconciled to the younger, and to himself.

This is the picture of *God* that Jesus is giving us—God is a patriarch, but he is one who is perceived as weak because he does not control us. He is the one who became weaker still in Jesus so that he could reconcile us to himself and to one another.

The story begins with the younger son speaking. Already Jesus’ hearers would have been surprised. The younger son is not supposed to speak. He’s the silent one in the background. But *what* he says to his father is even more shocking.

“Give me my share of the estate.” In the country, “the estate” means land. 9 of 10 of Jesus’ listeners were farmers. The land was their life. They had received it from their ancestors, and they held the land in trust for future generations. Some of you grew up with that kind of feeling of the connection between your family and the land. First-century Jews felt it even more intensely. So when Jesus says that the father “divided his property” between them, he means that the father broke up the farm and sold off part of it. You can’t get it back. Even if he only sold 1/3 of the land, it was forever.

When the younger son asks for his share of the estate, he is saying that he doesn’t care if the family loses its standing in the community. He’s also saying that he’d just as soon his father pass from the scene. “I’m going to leave. I don’t want you. I just want what you can give me. Give me my life without you.” Jesus understood that this is how many of us treat God. We feel

entitled. “God, give me what you owe me, then drop dead. Let me run my own life my own way.”

The shocking thing in this story is that the father goes along with it—just as God does. God gives us our own lives if we demand them. He lets us cut ourselves off from family and community. He doesn’t stop us when we leave. You could say that God plays dead if that’s what we want.

The people in town must have talked about this weak patriarch. What kind of father can’t keep his son from carving up the family farm? What kind of son is so selfish and shameless? People stop respecting the father—they feel sorry for him, but they also look down on him because he didn’t rule his family well. In Jesus’ day, the people in the village would have decided never to let that boy back in their community. If he ever showed up again, he would have to come back rich and throw a party for everybody in the village and honor them to balance the way he shamed the village when he left.

The Talmud describes a ceremony to deal with a man who loses his family’s inheritance to Gentiles. If he ever shows up in his village again, the villagers can fill an earthenware jug with burned nuts and grain (it must have stunk) and break it at his feet, pronouncing him cut off from his community forever.

The younger son no doubt expected to be a success when he left home. But he wasted every bit of cash he had—what the farm had been sold for—in what the NIV calls “wild living.” Other translations say “loose” or “dissolute” or “prodigal” living. The main point here is not that he did something immoral with the money, but that he *wasted* it. It was all down the drain. Then a famine came, because of a drought. He couldn’t have anticipated that. He became really poor. He hit bottom, taking a job with a pig farmer—the most disgusting job imaginable for a Jew.

What is it that “brought him to his senses”? *Hunger!* This is not repentance; this is just getting smart. He thinks: this is stupid to starve here when the hired hands back home have plenty of food. So he hatches a plan—just like the plan he had to leave home and make his fortune in another country—he’ll go back and ask his dad for a job. He rehearses his speech.

Now is when the story gets interesting as a story about God. There is no repentance so far, only hunger. But the God figure in the story *runs* to meet the boy who is on his way home with a stupid plan. You need to know that in Jesus’ time the patriarch did not run, ever. Even Aristotle said, “Great men never run in public.” You didn’t want to hoist your robe up and show your skinny legs and white ankles. You were supposed to sit at the table—think *Godfather* again—and wait for your son to come to you. But the father in this story, the one Jesus is using to tell us about God, puts aside all dignity. That’s the story I keep coming back to from the hymn in Philippians 2, how Christ put aside his dignity, emptied himself of his glory, and took the form of a servant. Here the Father God doesn’t care what anyone thinks. He runs like a girl to meet his disobedient son. He runs, embraces, and kisses.

All this is before the son says a word. Before he apologizes. Before he asks for forgiveness. Jesus says this is what God does. He doesn’t wait for us. Our repentance comes *after* he saves us. Our repentance consists of accepting the fact that God has accepted us. The younger son tries to give his speech: “I have sinned against heaven and you. I’m no longer worthy to be called your son.” Before he can even get around to asking for a job, the father says, in effect, worthy has nothing to do with it. You *are* my son.

One reason the father in the story ran may be that he wanted to get to the son before the villagers did. He didn’t want them to break that clay pot and exile his son forever. So he runs like a girl so that he can seize the initiative. This is how he does it. He tells his slaves to put on his

son the best robe—which would have been his *own* robe. Put a ring on his finger as a sign that he shares my authority. Put shoes on his feet so everyone will see he is my son, not a slave. And kill the fatted calf.

They didn't eat meat very often. If it was a family meal on a holiday it would be a small animal—a goat or a lamb. But the calf meant that the father would throw a party for the whole village. There was no way to keep meat in those days. You had to eat it right away. The father's plan was to serve a feast of roast veal for the neighbors, to restore the family's honor and to reconcile this son to the village. The father doesn't care if people think he's weak. He is glad to have his child back, and he wants everyone else to be glad as well.

If we stopped there, it would be enough. But the father has *two* sons, and he loves them both. Remember, Jesus is talking to Pharisees who don't think he should eat with sinners. They are the church people of their day. They understood that sinners need to repent and come home, but there need to be conditions and rules—and certainly there is no need to *celebrate* somebody deciding to live the kind of life we've been living all along.

In the story, the older son refuses to come into the house to the party his father has thrown for the village. This is a terrible insult to his father, in public. He's saying to his dad by his action, "You may be able to buy them off with veal, but not me. I *know* you're a weak father. I know you're letting my brother get away with murder. If you want to throw a party for him, you'll have to do it without my approval."

The neighbors would have expected the patriarch to sit right where he was at the head of the table, ignoring his son's absence until after the guests left, and then go clobber the older son. But the father doesn't care about his own honor. He wants his children to be reconciled. Once again he sets aside his honor. The father goes out to the good son the same way he went out to the bad son. He pleads with the son, outside the house. Another sign of weakness.

The older son lectures his dad. (1) I've been *slaving* for you all these years. That's how I really feel about my life in your home. How many church people really feel that way? I've been slaving for you, God, all these years. How can you give so much attention to scoundrels? (2) I've never disobeyed your commandment. That's what I think my life is about—obeying rules. How many church people feel that way? I've kept your rules all these years. I thought that was the way to get your approval, and now you expect me to approve of rule-breakers?

He makes a point about the other son being bad. "He squandered your property with prostitutes." How does he know that? We don't know that. It's just gossip. The older son is hardly a reliable source of information. All he knows is that his brother went broke. He just imagines it was because of all the sex he enjoyed, which the good son could not have.

Listen to the father's answer. He does not chastise the pig-headed older son. He does not call him self-righteous. He says to the older son, as God says to Pharisees and church people, (1) *You are always with me.* We've been together all this time. We are close. The arrival of your brother doesn't change that. This party is no threat to you. (2) *Everything I have is yours.* Everything I have left belongs to you. All my riches are available to you. You still have your inheritance. But most of all, you still have my love. You see, the older son *always* had what the prodigal was just now receiving. The Pharisees always had what the sinners were just getting. Longtime members of Harbor Church have always had what newcomers and so-called "sinners" among us are just now receiving. Why begrudge them what has always been yours?

The story does not have an ending. It ends with the father pleading with the son—outside the party, outside his home. The father has given up his honor to stand with you the same way he gave up his honor to stand with the sinner. You can accept his appeal which means saying that

you are willing to be reconciled to your brother. Or you can stand in the yard, humiliating your father even more, while the party goes on without you.

[This sermon borrows its title and many insights from a sermon I heard May 22, 2007, at the Festival of Homiletics in Nashville by Barbara Brown Taylor. She in turn drew many insights from Kenneth Bailey's work on Middle Eastern and Arabic understanding of Jesus' stories, notably in the book *Through Peasant Eyes*.]