

The Prodigal Son, Part 1: A Father's Heart
Parables Series: Stories About God's Generosity
Sermon on Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 (7/11 & 7/12/15)
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I don't know how the dynamics work in you all's families – where you fall in the line of siblings, if you have siblings...but I'm the oldest child in my family. And I certainly exhibit some of the classic “oldest child” behaviors: bossiness, being a know-it-all, feeling the need to make sure everything works out in the family – for good or ill...those kinds of things.

But my sister didn't join our little Hallenbeck crew until I was almost six – and those earliest years of life are incredibly formative. So, since I was by myself with my parents for nearly six years, in addition to exhibiting classic *oldest* child behaviors, I can also exhibit classic “*only* child” behaviors: things like irresponsibility and an occasional sense that the world revolves around *me*.

Again, I don't know how these kinds of dynamics play out in *your* families, but I couldn't help but think about family dynamics as today's story from Luke 15 has worked on me in recent weeks. Because today's story is about a *family*: it's about a father and two sons – and it's about all their fascinating family dynamics.

For the record, surely there were women in this family at some point: a mother, maybe even some sisters...but, for who knows what reasons, the family women are not featured in this particular story.

Perhaps because, in Jesus' time, father-son dynamics were given greater weight than were mother-son or mother-daughter dynamics. Perhaps because, in Jesus' time, women simply were not given as much space in public conversation. Who knows. Whatever the case may be, today's parable is about fathers and sons.

That said, mothers and sons – as well as mothers and daughters – can surely find particular meaning and importance in this story, too. Because, of course, since this is a story *Jesus* told, it's not just a story about *human* parents and *human* children.

Since this is a story *Jesus* told, we know it's also somehow about *God*. That's just the way it works when Jesus talks: we can learn things about ourselves, for sure...but, when Jesus talks, we are meant, first and foremost, to learn something about God.

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If you've been around McCabe Church much this summer, you may be aware that, in June, we began a year-long sermon- and worship-related focus on *generosity*.

To kick-off this focus on generosity, we've been exploring many of Jesus' parables – many of the stories he told. Because, when you explore Jesus' parables, you discover that many of them, at their core, are about *generosity* – in some way, shape, or form.

Many of Jesus' parables are about how we are to be generous toward others – generous in our thoughts, generous in our words, generous with our resources of time, energy, and money – but, more importantly, so many of Jesus' parables are about *God's* generosity toward us.

And any generosity we exhibit toward others is always a mere reflection of the generosity God bestows upon us day after day, moment by moment.

Let me say that again, because it bears repeating: *any generosity we exhibit toward others is always a mere reflection of the generosity God bestows upon us.*

This is a deeply important truth, in general...but it is particularly important as we consider all that happens in chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel.

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Last week, we entered into the world of Luke chapter 15 with a look at the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin.

From those two parables, we were reminded that we are each of us worth the search when we get lost: no matter how lost we get, no matter how difficult the search. To God, we are worth it.

Today's story from Luke 15 – a story Jesus told immediately after telling the parables of the lost sheep and coin – is most commonly referred to as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” though others have given it different names like “The Parable of the *Lost* Son” or “The Parable of the Loving Father.”

This particular parable is perhaps the best-known, best-loved story Jesus ever told...as such, we're spending two weeks on it.

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The last time I preached on this parable – almost exactly two years ago, in the church I served prior to McCabe – I remembered thinking, “Why in the world did I try to preach this parable in only a single sermon? There's just too much good stuff, here!” This time, I decided to do it differently...and I trust these two weeks with *this* parable will be worth our time.

This parable is so full, so rich in meaning, a preacher could preach a *month's* worth of sermons on it and would still only scratch its surface. Two weeks will have to suffice for our purposes here!

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If you've been around the church for a while, today's parable is probably imprinted on your brain: you know the plot, you know the characters, and you're pretty sure you know the point.

A man had two sons and, despite the fact that the father was still living, one day the younger son asked for his share of the inheritance.

He got his share of the inheritance...and then he promptly left home and spent the money on all sorts of unhealthy, unholy things. When the money ran out, the younger son became a hired man, but still found himself hungry...so he decided to go back home and beg his father to let him return.

When the younger son was getting close to home, his father saw him, ran to him, embraced him, put a ring on his finger, and threw a huge party to welcome him home. The *older* son, who had faithfully worked for his father all his life, was upset about this and did not want to join the party...but the father pleaded for him to celebrate because the lost son had been found.

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We *know* this story, right? We know the plot, we know the characters, and we're pretty sure we know the point. It's about welcoming the lost. It's about generosity. It's about forgiveness and reconciliation. The end. Right?

Yes. Welcoming the lost. Generosity. Forgiveness and reconciliation. This parable is absolutely about those things. But... But because we think we know this story so well, it's easy for us to miss just how challenging and how deeply personal it really is.

I mean, this is a story about a *family*...and what's more challenging and deeply personal than family?

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In my nearly 15 years of pastoral ministry, I have often found myself on the listening end of stories about families. Our families so often are the source of our greatest joy and triumph in life...but our families are also often the source of our greatest pain and disappointment.

No one knows us better than those in our own households; they know our strengths and our downfalls...they know what brings us happiness and sorrow...they know how to make us laugh and which buttons to push in order to make us mad...they know how to support us when we most need support and, unfortunately, they know how best to take advantage of us.

As a pastor, I am privileged hear your family stories – the joys and the triumphs, as well as the pain and the disappointments. Life does not always go as planned or as hoped for.

Though we want the best for our family members, we often fail to treat them with the love and respect they deserve...and, likewise, they often fail to treat *us* with the love and respect *we* deserve. This is perhaps most true when it comes to the relationship between parents and children.

And, of course, the parent-child relationship is center stage in today's parable from Luke 15.

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This may go without saying, but, as well-known and as well-loved as today's parable is, it can also stir-up a lot of unfortunate, emotional junk, can't it?

We do not all of us come from perfect families where everything went well for everyone all the time. (In fact, *none* of us comes from a "perfect" family where everything goes well for everyone all the time.)

We make mistakes – parents *and* children – and some of those mistakes devastate the parent-child relationship.

Of course, most parents do as well as they can with the resources they have... but, some parents take advantage of the inherent trust their children have in them.

Likewise, some *children* take advantage of the unconditional love their *parents* have for them.

Again, as well-known and as well-loved as today's parable is, it can all-too-easily remind us of the messiness that exists within our own families. The hurts of the past. The relationships that are in tatters. The children who left home with good reason and the parents who are still waiting for their own prodigal child to return.

This is a complex little story...and whatever has happened in your own family will cause you to look at this story in your own particular way.

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Now, I am at a bit of a disadvantage when it comes to the Parable of the Prodigal Son because I am not a parent. I think this story is deeply powerful whether or not you are a parent, and I certainly don't want any of you other non-parents out there to feel slighted!

But, as I thought through this story – and as tried to think about the father in this story – I wanted to hear from the parents I know. I wanted to hear what, in their opinion, defined their *heart* as a parent... I wanted to know how life was different after they became a parent, after they knew they were to become a parent.

So I took to Facebook to solicit these thoughts. I asked my Facebook friends – many of whom are McCabe Church folks – to let me know their thoughts on parenthood...their experience of having "a parent's heart."

The response was amazing! About 25 people responded to my question and their comments were both powerful and diverse:

One father of 20-something sons said, “the greatest happiness, greatest frustration, greatest fear, greatest pride and greatest time of tears all relate to our sons.” A young mother said, “after becoming a parent, I truly gained the ability to love unconditionally.” A brand-new dad wrote, “I have an overwhelming desire to 'protect' [my son] from any and all things hard and dark and difficult, while also knowing these things are all part of the journey.”

Another younger dad said, “Prior to fatherhood, I questioned my value, questioned my purpose...Fatherhood was transformative. Suddenly, I couldn't just live for me...There was another life, another human being who depended on me for protection, provision and guidance.”

A college friend wrote that “parenting permanently shifts your focus off of yourself and onto your child. What you want doesn't matter anymore (unless it ultimately helps your child). I have heard the expression that says [having a child is] like having your heart walking around outside your body!”

Along those same lines, another friend of mine wrote that parenting is all about “vulnerability. The keen awareness that two of the people I love the most [my children] are most often out of my control and care ... As a parent you are forced to trust the world a lot more...trust the people they are with...trust them. You are utterly reliant on others to help you care for these indescribable gifts.”

A female pastor colleague in an other state responded, “this parenting thing is HARD ... It amazes me that I can be completely broken by this little person who calls me mama, and simultaneously filled with a fiercer love than I knew I had within me.”

Another mom wrote this: “The first time I held [my son] and saw his beautiful tiny face I didn't think my heart could hold all of the love I [felt] ... If I could sum it up I would say – your children touch a part of you you never knew was there. The overflowing love and on the other side of the coin a nerve that hurts so badly when your child hurts you.”

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I got so many great responses from folks and, for that reason, I may use more of them in next week's sermon. Though not everyone who responded to my questions about parenthood said exactly the same thing, there were common themes: fierce, unconditional love for their children...and the reality that your children are able to drive you crazy and cause you pain in a way no one else can.

So...with that in mind, imagine today's parable from the father's perspective.

Imagine the crushing weight that falls on your shoulders when your younger child asks you for his share of the inheritance.

Not only does that mean your younger son is saying, “Father, you are dead to *me*,” it also means he is saying, “Father, *I* am dead to *you*.” It’s a double-edged sword and I’m sure the father felt its cut deeply and completely.

But what’s a father to do in this scenario? Does he say “no” and then wait for his son to simply run away and make money for himself in who knows what dangerous, God-forsaken ways?

Knowing his younger son as he did, perhaps the father decided the most loving thing to do would be to honor his son’s cruel request and to give him his half of the inheritance. The father knew this would mean grieving the loss of his son. But he *was* his son...and he loved him – unconditionally.

So, then, imagine the shock of seeing that same son on the horizon one day – perhaps years later. Imagine realizing all the prayers you’d offered had been answered. Yes, he’d taken advantage of you in the worst way...but he is still your son – and you still love him.

You run to him, embrace him, kiss him...you clothe him in the best stuff you have and you get the party started.

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The word “prodigal” means “wastefully or recklessly extravagant.”

The most common title of this story uses “prodigal” to describe the son who leaves and spends his inheritance in ways that are wastefully and recklessly extravagant. And this is accurate. In this way, the younger son truly is the *prodigal* son.

But, in so many ways, the real *prodigal* in this story is not the younger son. Yes, he asked for his inheritance early – something that was not only wasteful and reckless, but also horribly insulting and downright cruel to his father.

And, yes, he spent that inheritance wastefully, recklessly, on God knows what – these days it would be drugs, booze, and, well, you can use your wildest imagination to guess what else. The younger son is, in these ways, a prodigal.

The real prodigal in this story, however, is the father. He is wastefully and recklessly extravagant in the way he shows love for his younger son. Don’t you think?

The heart of the father in this story was defined by that fierce, unconditional love.

As human beings, we are often unable to fully offer the kind of fierce, unconditional love we see offered in this parable. It is wasteful and reckless: I read this story and I can't help but wonder how long it will be before the younger son tries to pull this stunt again – how long before he asks for more money and takes off with it...*again*.

I read this story and I wonder if the father – this prodigal father who is wasteful and reckless in his love for his son – I wonder if this father also wonders how long his younger son will stick around this time.

As human beings, there are times when we have to set boundaries around people who take advantage of us. If we don't, we will just get all used up. Sometimes we have to simply leave our prodigal loved ones in the hands and heart of God.

See, while this story does, certainly, make us think about our own parents and our own children, it's really a story about *God*.

If we find ourselves too caught-up in what it may or may not be saying about our own *human*, families, we are missing a major part of the story's point.

As I said toward the beginning of this sermon, when Jesus tells a parable, he is ultimately telling us a story about *God* and about how God relates to us.

The grace of this parable is that our own hearts and our own “unconditional love” are *nothing* compared to God's. That's good news for us when we are reckless... and it's good news for our own prodigal loved ones. Thanks be to God.