

The Prodigal Son, Part 2: A Heavenly Party
Parables Series: Stories About God's Generosity
Sermon on Luke 15:1-2, 11-32 (7/18 & 7/19/15)
Jennifer M. Hallenbeck

Early this summer here at McCabe United Methodist Church, 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*.

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

Today is the last official day of the parables portion of this year-long focus on generosity.

(We'll be taking a bit of a break from the series while I'm on vacation over the next couple of weekends...but we'll pick back up again August 8th and 9th as we begin a four-week series on some of the *miracles* God performs through Jesus in the Gospel of John.)

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Two weeks ago, we entered the world of Luke chapter 15 with a look at the Parables of the Lost Sheep and 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...and God is so generous in seeking us out.

Last week we began a two-part miniseries on the story Jesus told immediately after telling the parables of the lost sheep and coin. The story is most commonly called “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.”

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Those of us who've been around the church for a while likely have the Parable of the Prodigal Son imprinted on our brains: we know the plot, we know the characters, we know the point...and most of us just *love* this story. Right?

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One of my college religion professors wrote a commentary on the Gospel of Luke and, in his commentary on this parable, he wrote, “Any story that everybody knows will be a story that nobody has listened to closely for a long time.”¹

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1 Swanson, Richard. *Provoking the Gospel of Luke*. 129.

Many of us know this story inside and out...we're pretty sure we know the point...and we *love* it because it's about God's ultimate concern for those who get lost. It's about amazing grace. It's a story with powerful imagery that often warms us to the core of our being.

But this story in Luke chapter 15 is not a story to be sentimental about. Despite its place as one of the best-known, best-loved of Jesus' parables, it is an extremely meddlesome story – and, if we really *got* it, we all might not love it quite so much.

See, we all exist somewhere in this parable: as the one who knows how to “work the system” and play his father like a cheap fiddle, or as the one who resents his brother and his father...the one who works hard and can't stand those who mooch their way through life.

“Any story that everybody knows will be a story that nobody has listened to closely for a long time.”

It's a meddlesome story...and if you can't find yourself somewhere in it, you're not listening carefully enough. So, let's listen to it again.

As I read it, pay attention to who *you* are in the story...whose attitude most closely resembles your own – maybe it's only one of the characters, maybe it's a couple of them, or maybe you've found yourself like all three of them at some point in your life. If it helps you to listen better, close your eyes as I read:

Tax collectors and sinners were all crowding around to listen to Jesus. So the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses started grumbling, “This man is friendly with sinners. He even eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this story:

Once a man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, “Give me my share of the property.” So the father divided his property between his two sons.

Not long after that, the younger son packed up everything he owned and left for a foreign country, where he wasted all his money in wild living. He had spent everything, when a bad famine spread through that whole land. Soon he had nothing to eat.

He went to work for a man in that country, and the man sent him out to take care of his pigs. He would have been glad to eat what the pigs were eating, but no one gave him a thing.

Finally, he came to his senses and said, “My father’s workers have plenty to eat, and here I am, starving to death! I will go to my father and say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son. Treat me like one of your workers.’”

The younger son got up and started back to his father. But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt sorry for him. He ran to his son and hugged and kissed him. The son said, "Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son."

But his father said to the servants, "Hurry and bring the best clothes and put them on him. Give him a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. Get the best calf and prepare it, so we can eat and celebrate. This son of mine was dead, but has now come back to life."

He was lost and has now been found." And they began to celebrate.

The older son had been out in the field. But when he came near the house, he heard the music and dancing. So he called one of the servants over and asked, "What's going on here?"

The servant answered, "Your brother has come home safe and sound, and your father ordered us to kill the best calf." The older brother got so angry that he would not even go into the house.

His father came out and begged him to go in. But he said to his father, "For years I have worked for you like a slave and have always obeyed you. But you have never even given me a little goat, so that I could give a dinner for my friends. This other son of yours wasted your money on prostitutes. And now that he has come home, you ordered the best calf to be killed for a feast." His father replied,

"My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we should be glad and celebrate! Your brother was dead, but he is now alive. He was lost and has now been found."

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Let's spend some time thinking about these characters...about which of them seems most like *us*.

A father has two sons and the younger one asked for his share of the inheritance money. A cruel question because you usually don't get inheritance money until someone dies – and the father in this story was still very much alive.

So, in this story, we have a selfish younger son...and we have a father who went along with his younger son's cruel request. And the father didn't put up a fight when his younger son asked for his share of the inheritance! He simply sold off half his land and gave the profit to his younger child. Makes the father seem like a sap or an enabler.

We might be inclined to write this father off as an old fool who doesn't realize when he's being taken for a ride. But, surely he knew.

Children who behave the way the younger son in this story behaved don't decide in an instant to ask for their inheritance: the younger son in this story had surely been pulling this kind of scheme his whole life, so the father was just as surely well-versed in his son's cruel, irresponsible behavior. But it was his son nonetheless. And he loved his son.

So, we have in this story a father who spends money and love on his younger son as though he has an infinite amount of both money and love. And we have a younger son who seems to feel no real sense of responsibility to his loving, generous father.

Perhaps some of you find personal connections with the father and with the younger son. If I'm being honest, between these three characters, if I were to choose which I one I most resemble, I'd have to say the older brother...because, goodness knows I can be resentful when generosity is shown to those I don't think are worthy.

Whether they didn't work very hard or they're not as smart or not as attractive, not as talented...it's ugly in my mind and heart sometimes when I get to thinking like the older brother in this story – when I get to thinking that, for whatever reasons, I *deserve* something more than others. Please tell me the same is true for many of you!

Let's take a moment to imagine we're the older brother in this story: how many of us would secretly hope our reckless, younger brother had come home with an unfortunate disease or with permanently damaged skin and teeth from his drug use? How many of us would prefer to think *that* is what he deserved...rather than the party he got?

I suspect I'm not the only one in here who would secretly wish for those things. And when I come face-to-face with that part of myself, I am deeply ashamed.

In other places in the Gospels, Jesus reminds us to “love your neighbor as yourself”...but, when I read this story, that goes right out the window. My stomach churns a little when I think about the younger son and how he took advantage of his father's love.

I think, “How dare he treat his father like that! How dare he waste his inheritance – an inheritance he asked for while his father was still alive – and then expected to be taken back into his home when the money was gone. How dare he!”

If you are someone who gets angry and resentful about people who “work the system” and get everything they can out of government programs...well, this is

the story for you – because that's who the younger son is. He knew how to milk his father for everything he had – and he wasn't afraid to do it.

And, then, he got a *party* when he returned home after wasting the inheritance money! *His father threw him a party!!!*

Understandably, the older son wasn't too happy about the party. He had been there, day after day, helping to run the farm in his brother's absence and there was never any party for him. Why should his cruel, irresponsible younger brother get one?

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Now...keep in mind it's not that the father didn't love his *older* son – he did. And it's not that the father wouldn't have thrown a party for his older son – he would have. But children are different.

Parents love their children equally...but children can't always be *treated* equally.

The older son had the great privilege of a daily relationship with his father – that is what he chose...and, if he'd bothered to think about it, he would have realized the blessings that offered him – not only blessings from his father, but also from his father's household, from their servants and from his father's friends.

The older son's steadfast, faithful service to his father surely fostered trust and respect among their servants and friends.

Trust and respect are not easily earned, and they are worth celebrating...but trust and respect may seem unimportant when your selfish younger brother shows up and your dad throws him the party of the century. It's enough to get the blood boiling, isn't it?

The younger son had been cruel. He had been irresponsible – not only with his father's money, but also with his father's *heart*. He had been a terrible steward of his resources: the inheritance that should have lasted him the rest of his life, lasted only a short time – and despite his father's generosity toward him, I suspect he didn't spend any of his inheritance on philanthropic purposes. He did not *deserve* a welcome home party.

He had used and abused his father's love and resources...he went back home and got a feast. His overly generous father gave him even more...

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If we're not careful about how we interpret this story, we can think that we are somehow supposed to be like the father in it. So I'm going to repeat something I said in last week's sermon: we humans are *limited* in our capacity to be generous with some people.

And we should be. Some people need boundaries from *us*. We are not meant to be rolled out on the ground like a carpet anyone and everyone can walk all over. That's why I think it's important for us to connect more with the *sons* in this story, rather than with the father.

Do I think this is a story that challenges us to be generous? I absolutely think that...but I just don't think this story is meant to challenge us to be like the father in it.

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There are a couple of interesting triangles in today's reading from Luke 15. One of those triangles emerges right at the beginning of the chapter – in the introductory verses when we learn to whom Jesus addressed the three parables he told in that chapter.

That particular triangle is Jesus, the tax collectors and sinners, and the Pharisees and teachers of the religious Law. To simplify that, we can understand that triangle to be Jesus, the sinners, and the religious leaders. In that triangle, the religious leaders grumbled about how Jesus ate with the sinners. (For shame!)

Then, of course, in today's parable we have another triangle: the father, the younger son, and the older son.

Now, I don't think Jesus ever intends for the meaning of his parables to be too simple, but the comparison here *seems* pretty simple to me: Jesus is like the father in the story who welcomes the lost and who celebrates their return...(this makes sense, of course, since we understand Jesus, as God's Son, to be part of God's very Self)...

the “sinners,” then, are like the younger son who waste away their familial relationships but who, in the end, choose to return home...and the religious leaders are like the self-righteous older son who seems to resent his father and who doesn't want to celebrate his brother's return.

And have you noticed we actually don't know what the older brother decided to do? The story ends with the father's words to the older son hanging in the air: *“My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we should be glad and celebrate! Your brother was dead, but he is now alive. He was lost and has now been found.”*

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I think – I *think* – the point Jesus is getting at here is that God likes to throw welcome home parties...and that God wants *everyone* to join the celebration. // Before Jesus told the Parable of the Prodigal Son, earlier in Luke chapter 15, he *twice* said something about how heaven celebrates when a sinner returns to God.

And really, the people who should understand that kind of heavenly party the best, are the ones who are in a *daily* relationship with God. It's easy to take for granted, but, when you have a daily relationship with God, every day – every small victory in life – is like a mini-party.

So, we who already know and love God in an intimate, daily way, are the ones who should really know how to throw these heavenly, “welcome home” parties. The older brother in this story should have been the first to join his father in embracing his brother.

And that's what church – what Christian faith and life – should be about: welcoming sinners and celebrating God's love with them.

If we are resentful of people we think don't *deserve* God's generosity, then we don't get to join the party. And where's the fun in that?

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The good news of the story is that our God *is* like the father in this story: it's good news for us when we are selfish and reckless like the younger son...and it's good news for us when we are self-righteous and resentful like the older son.

But, the good news of this story leaves us with the same choice the father gave his older son: are we willing to join the heavenly party? Are we willing to celebrate with saints and sinners alike?

I suspect our Christian journey – and life, in general – will be much simpler and much more joyful if we learn to answer those questions with a resounding “Yes!” So let me ask them again:

Are we willing to join the heavenly party? Are we willing to celebrate with saints and sinners alike? The choice is ours. Amen.