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Community Church of Issaquah
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"Prodigals"
Luke 15-16-32

Families are so complicated. Even the best of families, even the families that look the most perfect from the outside, even those families have their complications.

And today we have a less than perfect family. A father and two sons. One a runaway, the other cold and ungrateful.

In some ways the entire Gospel of Luke has been building toward this story about a father and his sons. Before Jesus had been born, one of the things that the angel had told Zechariah was that a marker of the kingdom would be that the hearts of the fathers would be turned back toward their children.

You know, that's always struck me as a slightly odd verse. Because it seems to imply that the hearts of the fathers weren't naturally inclined toward their children.

Who knows. I'm not a psychologist. Maybe that is the case. I do know that one of the reasons people advocate for paternity leave for fathers is that it's been shown that parents who spend significant time with their infant early on are more involved parents over the child's whole life. Mothers, simply because they're often nursing, usually are the ones to spend more time with their babies.

But I don't think a lack of quality time was the only thing that made the relationship between fathers and sons so fraught.

See, in ancient Rome, fathers were widely known to be much stricter than mothers. To say that they ruled with a heavy hand is putting it lightly. It's well documented that the imperial

Rome government was used to intervening when the strictness began to dip into violence.

Fathers and strictness. Why do those two things go together so often? Even today, a dominant picture of fatherhood still remains the strict, authoritarian father, focused on raising obedient and self-reliant children.

It's funny how something like that can seem so natural until it's held up to the light of Scripture. Buckling down, having a strict moral household, teaching kids not to come to a parent for nurture but to rely on themselves—all of those things make sense—and then we get to the story of the prodigal son. Because there our vision of true fatherhood gets turned upside down.

See, in the society of Jesus' day, what the prodigal son had done wrong wasn't just that he went and squandered his part of the family fortune. It wasn't even that he had lived hard and fast. The thing that the prodigal son did that was worse than anything was that he treated his father as if his father were dead. Think about it: when do you get an inheritance? You get an inheritance only when the person has died. Not only does the younger son demand his share of the estate, but he demands it now.

He is basically saying to his father, "I want you dead so that I can get what's mine." Wow. For those of us who have had children who have turned their back to us or cut us out of their lives, we know what it feels like to be treated like we were preferred dead. What more painful thing is there than that?

But to add to it all, in Jesus' day this father would have been living in an honor-shame society where keeping up social pretenses would

have been of the utmost importance. Having a son go so wild meant social shame. So the son not only wants his father to die, but he shames him.

Which makes it all the more amazing when the son returns. Because the father rightly could turn his back on him. The father justifiably could ream him up and down. The father generously could just send him out to his fields to work as hired hand. But what does the father do?

The father runs to his son. The father doesn't even take social propriety into consideration! The Bible says he sees his son from far off, he's filled with compassion, and he takes off down the road to his son. Neighbors are peeking out their doors, old men turn in the street in shock, women pull their children a little closer as this heretofore respectable landowner comes running down the street, his robes flapping in the wind. He pulls his son into an embrace and immediately declares a feast to celebrate his son's return. The father turns all our pictures of what fatherhood looks like on their head.

We thought this story was the story of the prodigal son. But it's really the story of the prodigal father. If you look prodigal up in Merriam-Webster, it says "characterized by profuse or wasteful expenditure, recklessly extravagant, carelessly spending time, money, etc." Just think: The father didn't hold his wealth back from his son. He didn't hold his love back from his son. He didn't even hold his own social standing back from his son. This is no stern, upright, civic citizen father. This is a father whose love for his son isn't held back by *anything*.

And here's the thing. This is the kind of Father that God is. God isn't concerned with his reputation or saving face or even letting us know just how costly our disobedience has been. God runs out to us. In fact, we can't forget that the person telling the story of the prodigal son and

his prodigal father is Jesus. Jesus who *is* God running out to us, who *is* God holding nothing back, coming to us when we were still sinners. When we live as children of a Father like that, we are set free. We are set free from our pasts and we are set free to live new lives. The Father says, "this is my son, this is my daughter who was dead and who has come to life again!" We are born again.

This past week, I was reading a novel about a meek 29-year-old spinster named Valancy who is utterly afraid everything. But then she gets some news. She has a heart condition and it's soon going to be fatal. And then she realizes:

"She, who had been afraid of almost everything in life, was not afraid of death. It did not seem in the least terrible to her. And she need not be afraid of anything else. Why had she been afraid of things? Because of life. Afraid of [rich] Uncle Benjamin because of the menace of poverty in old age. But now she would never be old—neglected—tolerated. Afraid of being an old maid all her life. But not she would not be an old maid very long. Afraid of offending her mother and her clan because she had to live with and among them and couldn't live peaceably if she didn't give into them. But now she hadn't. Valancy felt a curious freedom."¹

When you find life after death that life is categorically different. **Fear** is gone. See the younger son's life after his metaphorical death is not like his first life. The constraints that have bound are destroyed. There isn't fear because we now know that we are loved perfectly. As Valancy said, there is a curious freedom. We have done the worst. And we have been loved right through it.

But the story of these two prodigals, father and son, isn't done yet. See, there is one family

¹ Lucy Maud Montgomery, "The Blue Castle," pg 73.

member we haven't talked about. The elder son. Now the elder son has all the appearance of being a good son to his father, and he definitely has social propriety on his side. *He* wasn't the one to run off with his inheritance. *He* didn't squander his money. But when you take a closer look is he actually a good son? Because think about it, despite appearances the elder son is apparently living a life pretty separate from his father. He refuses to come into the feast his father has prepared when his duty back then as the eldest son would have been to be the host. He doesn't even call his father Father but instead he stresses his servitude and then he complains (right when he should be celebrating at a party!) about how poorly he's been treated by his father!² How ironic! See the younger son had come back hoping to be treated as a servant and is embraced as a son. But the elder son who has the full inheritance, whose sonship was never in question, considers his lot in life servitude!

What a pity. To have the whole world and not be able to receive it with joy.

I love how C.S. Lewis puts it: "If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual: the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronising and spoiling sport, and back-biting, the pleasures of power, of hatred... That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute."

The thing with those second kind of people though is their vices are harder to recognize. Because it seems so close to righteousness. It's like that stern, strict father. It seems so natural and right...until you hold it up to the light of the gospel. Because when you hold that cold, hard-hearted elder son up to the example of his father,

you see that his righteousness is actually no righteousness at all. In fact, when you hold both sons up to the father one is much closer than the other to their father's image. And it's the younger son. You can see the family resemblance in their holding nothing back, in their prodigality. But when you look at the elder son, the resemblance starts to flicker and fade.

See this is the choice that is before us: do we want to take after our father? Are we willing to risk being a little bit prodigal? Can we let ourselves be reckless? Are we going to see ourselves as slaves or as sons and daughters? And here's the kicker: Are we going to be willing to run after the other prodigals in our lives? Are we will to throw off shame to welcome in those we love?

In a few minutes, we're going to have communion. We often forget it, but communion at its core is God inviting us to eat with him. God today is the father laying out a welcome home feast for us. Extravagant. Prodigal. No holds barred. We are celebrating that the Father has run out to us. That God didn't consider it below himself to take on human form and to walk among us, but that he came in Jesus to eat with us, to feast with us, to be in relationship with us. We are prodigals, us all. But we are loved by a prodigal God. A God who is reckless. A God who risks all that some might be saved. A God who loves his sons and daughters each and every one.

² Joel Green, "Luke" pg 585.