

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, March 6, 2016
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2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
“The Parable of the Two Sons”

Having a great party is not always easy. A friend of mine once told me that the most difficult part of getting ready for her wedding was figuring out who to invite and who not to. There are always going to be people saying “Oh, I’m invited?” and those who are going to say “Oh, I can’t believe I’m not invited. I thought we were pretty close!” And if there are family members or friends who are not in very good terms, but should be at the wedding, it gets a lot more difficult. The wedding celebration is really for the bride and the groom, and the focus of the wedding should be congratulating the couple and celebrating the wonderful day. But bad relationships can make celebrating together a bit challenging.

The Parable well known to us as the “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” ends with a great feast, with the father - the host of the party - trying to reconcile his two sons. The image of the younger son and the father reuniting is so powerful that we often leave out the rest of the parable. But the parable continues on to have a feast that the older son feels quite angry about, and it ends with the father trying to shift the older son’s perspective.

As Jesus was telling this parable, there were two groups listening – a group of tax collectors and sinners, and a group of Pharisees and the scribes.

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was associated with the tax collectors and sinners. In fact, one of his twelve disciples, Levi, was a tax collector. When Jesus called Levi to follow him, Levi gave a great banquet for him, and there was a large crowd of tax collectors with them. And Jesus was criticized by the Pharisees and the scribes for eating and drinking with them.

Table fellowship was an important part of Jesus’ ministry. Back then, servants ate with other servants, masters ate with masters. People of same status of honor ate at the same table. So for Jesus to eat with tax collectors and sinners was to say that he is friends with them. And sharing memories of eating food and having someone provide food - the memories of generosity, abundance and celebration - was vital to this ministry of eating together, and it was a foreshadowing of the great Messianic banquet that God and all God’s people will enjoy together. So far, Jesus had been associating himself with this group of sinner and tax collectors, by eating with them and having fellowship with them.

Tax collectors weren’t simply government officials; they were considered to be traitors who collected tax for the hated Romans. Sinners were people who were outside of the acceptable community. They were outcasts, those who violated religious laws, those who were deemed unacceptable to God. They were judged for not having made better choices by those who made better choices or had the privilege of making choices about their lives.

The second group of people stand in high contrast to the group of tax collectors and sinners. The Gospel of Luke portrays the Pharisees and the scribes as religious leaders who were opposed

to Jesus' ministry from the beginning and whose main concern was to obey the Jewish law. They are the righteous people who make the "right" choices. Just as before, they were grumbling and saying, "This fellow (Jesus) welcomes sinners and eats with them."

And their grumbling triggered three parables – one about the lost sheep, one about the lost coin, and finally, the Parable of the loving father and the two sons.

So there was a man who had two sons. And the younger one could not wait until the father would die so that he can get his inheritance. Lacking any respect for his father, he asked that he receives his inheritance now. Surprisingly, the father did give it to him, and the son used all of it in a foreign land to support a disgraceful lifestyle. And when a famine took place, he had nothing left to survive the famine. He ended up working in a pig farm – and pigs were unclean animals for Jewish people. Not only does he feed the pigs, he ends up eating what these unclean animals were eating. That is how low he had fallen; fallen because he was blinded by his desires and fallen because he lacked wisdom. And when he hit rock bottom, he came to his senses. It took him to get to that far to realize that there was abundance at his father's house, that even servants ate three meals a day.

So he started his way back, walking miles after miles, probably had clothes that were filthy and worn out, possibly no sandals on, and certainly with nothing to eat. He probably rehearsed what he was going say to his father over and over and over again, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called you son. Treat me like one of your hired hand."

He was ready to brace humility in front of everyone, even in front of the servants and everyone in his community. He was the epitome of a sinner, someone who made an unforgivable mistake. And while the best he hoped for is to be taken back home as servant, his father saw him from far off. He was waiting for him everyday, looking out to see if he is coming back, so when the father saw him he ran and showered him with hugs and kisses. The son tried to say what he had practiced all along, but the father didn't even let him finish, he ordered the servants to make his son dressed with the best and to prepare to celebrate. He gave his son a royal treatment.

This is a scandalous grace! No rebuking, no lecturing and no conditions laid down, all because the father considered his son dead and now he was alive again. He thought he had lost his son and found him.

Because we love the story of the younger son so much, it's easy to think of the older son as the bad guy. But he is not being a bad guy. Rather, this grace, forgiveness, and acceptance is so extravagant that it's scandalous!

The older son finished his work for the day. He's a good son; responsible, hard working and he behaves himself. And he came home to the sounds of a feast – one that's certainly not for him, but for a younger brother who had put his whole family to shame. The older brother had to live through the consequences of what his younger brother did; the family had faced shame, and the older brother probably saw how much the father still waited for him and tried harder to be the good son - a proud and a pleasing son. And now that this prodigal son was back, for a punishment

he gets a feast! What more does the older brother have to do to get a party, if not with a fatted calf, then at least with a young goat?

He was angry and felt unappreciated for all the hard work he had done for his family. It's easy to label him as "the self-righteous son," but we also have to recognize that he had indeed been a good son. The older son is so upset that he does not join the feast, and the father leaves the feast in order to approach him, just as he reached out to his younger son. The father listens to the older son pouring out his anger, and saying "this son of *yours* did all these things!" Instead of calling him as his brother.

But the father does not rebuke him for being rude to his father or say that he is a self-righteous person. The father says "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of *yours* was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." He was gently reminding him that the older son doesn't need acknowledgement or recognition, because all that is the father's is the oldest son's. He is not a servant but his father's is the son's. And now the father asks him if he could also have the compassion that the father has, and join this celebration.

It is as if Jesus was asking the Pharisees and the scribes to see that the tax collectors and the sinners are their brothers and sisters in God. He was trying to shift their focus from being good religious people by following the laws to God's new work that was being done through Jesus Christ – the ministry of forgiveness and love – the ministry of sitting in one table, sharing a meal. Jesus was inviting *both* groups to celebrate together in a feast; one group embracing grace, and one group remembering grace.

Who do you relate to in the parable? Can you relate to the younger son and fully embrace God's forgiveness and love? Can you relate to the older son and receive God's call to remember and offer grace?

God calls both the younger and the older son towards reconciliation with God and with each other. This feast of celebration of reconciliation is God's intent for humanity, as Apostle Paul says:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:17-18)

Amen.