

02/13/22

Luke 15:11-32

Luke 15:11-16

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

Luke 15:17-32

But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe — the best one — and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' "

Then the father said to him, "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."

I have a 3rd text for you this morning—not a Biblical text but a historical one. This comes from Coretta Scott King, the widow of Martin Luther King, Jr: "*The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.*"

Because we are continuing our conversation from last week on the nature and meaning of grace, I want to repeat that quote with one small change that I think suits our topic better without altering the meaning of her words. Try it this way:

"*The **grace** of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.*"

I'm going to retell the story Judy and I just read by borrowing an ancient form of story telling, known as midrash, that has been used by Jewish rabbis for centuries.

Midrash is a way of taking a familiar story and turning it, to see it in a new light. It's like holding a diamond to the sun, turning it this way and that and watching as new colors flash out. It's a way of inquiring into the ancient stories in order to explore modern questions, in hopes of hearing not just hear what God said back then, but what God might be saying today.

So the first thing I'm going to is change the title. We know this as the parable the Prodigal Son. But this title isn't from Jesus. It was attached to the parable long after the fact. The word "prodigal" is nowhere to be found in this story.

So we can call it whatever we want; because we are free to look for things we haven't seen before. So today I'm calling this the "Parable of the Fearful Brother". It goes like this.

Once there were two brothers who did not get along. We don't know why. Maybe the younger was reckless or restless. Maybe the older was a bully who made younger feel unwelcome in his own home. Anyway, it was clear that there was not room for the both of them on the family farm.

So the younger one day asks his father for an early inheritance. Surprisingly, the father agrees. Maybe he knew how hard the older brother was to live with? Or maybe he wanted his younger son to have the chance to grow up without constantly being beat up and put down?

But even more surprisingly, the father gives the early inheritance to *both* sons. The father "divided his property *between them*," is what Jesus says.

Within days the younger brother is gone—off to a place where no one knows his name, his troubles far behind; a place where he is free to make his own decisions—most of which turn out not so good.

Soon he is out of money and just as soon he is out of friends. So he finds himself slopping pigs on a stranger's farm. And there, one day, he wakes up; he “comes to himself.” He realizes the life of a servant back home is way better than this. So he gets up and goes home.

And here the story takes another turn. Remember, the father has divided his property *between* the two boys. This has consequences. The younger son is going back to where his father lives, but he is also going back to the farm his brother now owns. He’s not going home. *His* home is gone. He may gain his father’s good will, but his brother holds all the cards.

What will the bully do when little brother comes home empty handed?

But the boy gets lucky. He comes over the hill in sight the home place when big brother is out working in the field. The father, maybe retired by now and sitting on the porch, sees a rough looking character approaching. With a father’s eyes and heart he looks through the rags and the muck and sees his son.

Before anyone else notices he is up and running. He embraces the smelly boy and weeps over him. Then he begins ordering *his sons’s servants*—“Quick, get him a robe and a ring and some shoes. And go kill the fatted calf. Get the party started. My son has come home!”

The party begins. The music is loud. The dancing vigorous. The father’s joy fills the house. The angels in heaven are dancing along.

Then the older son comes in from the field and is told his father is throwing a party for his brother.

His *brother*? He has no brother. His brother is dead—and good riddance to him.

Then he realizes it’s true. And he is livid!

The father, so happy to have son number 2 back safe and sound can’t bear the thought of now losing number 1. So he goes out to him and begs him to come inside.

But number 1 is close to a stroke. His face is purple; the veins on his neck bulging. “You never gave me so much as a goat” he spits. “But when this son of yours comes back you kill the fatted calf for him! And it’s my calf, father. It’s *my meat* you’re feeding to him. That’s my robe and my ring! This is my house. These are my servants.

“Who do you think is paying for this party?”

And right there you have the central question in this story.

Who *is* paying for this party?

Forget what you’ve heard about the wasteful younger son who crawls home begging forgiveness. This story isn’t about him.

And forget what you've heard about the father who forgives and welcomes the wayward one home. The story isn't about him either.

The story, today, is about the older son, the one who now controls the farm; the one who has been given everything by his father; the one—the *only* one, who has the means to welcome his brother home.

So who *is* paying for this party? Answer that, and you will understand this story.

“Who is paying for this?” the older son demands again.

“My child”, the father almost whispers, “everything *I had* is already yours. I was hoping *you* would pay for the party. I was hoping *you* would have the heart to take him in and welcome him home.

“He's *your brother*.”

“We thought was dead—he *was* as good as dead. I was hoping, now that he's come, *you* would make room for him.

“Everything I had is already yours” his father reminds him again. “I want my son—your brother, back home. But don't you see. I can't make it happen; he can't come home unless *you* welcome him.

“My son,” the father says, “*you* must pay for the party.”

"The grace of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members."

Amen.