

THE TWO LOST SONS

Luke 15:11-32 Wed., March 10, 2010

Jesus' parable might best be named the Parable of the Two Lost Sons.

Act 1 begins with a short but shocking request. The younger son comes to the father and says, "Give me my share of the estate."

Not that there was anything amiss in the son's expectation of being in his Father's will. In those days when a father died the oldest son received a double portion of what the other children inherited. If a father had two heirs, the oldest would have gotten two-thirds of the estate and the younger would have received one-third.

However this division only occurred when the father died. Here the youngest son asks for his inheritance now, which was a sign of deep disrespect. To ask for this while the father was alive was essentially the same as to wish him dead. The youngest son was essentially saying that he wants his father's things but not his Father.

His relationship to his father has been a means to the end of enjoying his wealth, he likes the gadgets his dad can get him, but is tired of that relationship. He wants out. "Give me what is mine," he says.

The Father's response is even more startling than the request. This was an intense patriarchal society in which lavish expressions of deference and respect for elders and particularly for ones parents were of supreme importance.

A traditional Middle Eastern father would be expected to respond to such a request by driving the son out of the family with nothing except physical blows. The Father doesn't do anything like that. He simply "divided his property between them."

The wealth of the father would have primarily been in real estate. Still to this day in southern Minnesota sections of land are still called the by names of the people who had them in the first place. The Voehl section name would still be used for some sections of land.

The younger brother, then, is asking his father to tear his life apart. And the father does so, for the love of his son. Most of Jesus' listeners would never have seen a Middle Eastern patriarch respond like this. The father patiently endures a tremendous loss of honor as well as the pain of rejected love. Ordinarily when our love is rejected we get angry, retaliate, and do what we can to diminish our affection for the rejecting person, so we don't hurt so much. But his father maintains his affection for the son and bears the agony.

Now we come to scene 1 of Act 1. The son goes off to the "far country" and squanders everything he has through and out of control life style. When he is literally down in the mud with the pigs, he "comes to his senses" and devises a plan. First he says to himself, he will return to his father and admit that he was wrong and that he has forfeited the right to be his son. But secondly he intends to ask his father to "make me like one of your hired men."

This is a very specific request. Servants worked on the estate and lived there. But “hired men” were various kinds of tradesmen and craftsmen who lived in local villages and earned a wage. Many commentators believe that the son’s strategy went like this.

The younger son had disgraced his family and therefore the whole community. He was “dead” to them as the father describes it. The rabbis taught that if you violated the community’s standards an apology was not sufficient, you also had to make restitution.

The son intends to say; “Father, I know I don’t have the right to come back into the family. But if you apprentice me to one of your hired men so I can learn a trade and a wage, then at least I could begin to pay off my debt.” That was his plan. There in the pigsty the younger son rehearses his speech. When he feels he is ready for the confrontation, he picks up and begins the journey home.

We come to the third and dramatic scene. The younger son comes within sight of the house. His father sees him and runs-runs to him! As a general rule, distinguished Middle Eastern Patriarchs did not run. Children might run; young men might run, but not the paterfamilias, the dignified pillar of the community, the owner of the great estate. He would not pick up his robes and bare his legs, but this father does. He runs to his son showing his emotions and openly falls upon him and kisses him.

This almost surely would have taken the younger brother by surprise. Flummoxed, he tries to roll out his business plan for restitution. The father interrupts him, not only ignoring his rehearsed speech, but directly contradicting it, “Quick!” He says to his servants. “Bring the best robe and put it on him!” What is he saying!?

The best robe in the house would have been the father’s own robe, the unmistakable sign of restored standing in the family. The father is saying, “I’m not going to wait until you’ve paid off your debt, I’m not going to wait until you’ve duly groveled. You are not going to earn your way back into the family; I am simply going to take you back. I will cover your nakedness, poverty, and rags with the robes of my office and honor

He commands his servants to prepare a feast of celebration, with “the fattened calf” as the main course. In that society most meals did not include meat. Meat was often reserved for special occasions and parties. But no meat was more expensive than the fattened calf. To throw such a feast was something that happened only on the rarest occasions, and likely the entire village was invited. There was music and dancing, all to celebrate the restoration of the younger son to life, family, and community. What a blowout, what a scene!

But act one challenges the elder brother with a startling message: God’s love and forgiveness can restore any and every kind of sin or wrongdoing. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done. It doesn’t matter if you’ve deliberately oppressed people or even murdered people, or how much you’ve abused yourself. The younger brother knew in his father’s house that there was food to spare, but he discovered that there was also grace to spare. There is no evil that the father’s love cannot pardon and cover; there is no sin that is a match for his grace.

Act one then shows the father pouncing on his son in love not only before he has a chance to clean up his life and evidence a change of heart, but even before he can recite

his repentance speech. Nothing—not even abject contrition merits the favor of God. The Father’s love and acceptance are absolutely free. But this Act one cannot stand alone. Some commentators say that this parable contradicts traditional Christian doctrine. There is no mention of atonement for sin. There’s not a need for a Savior on the cross that pays for our sin. God is a God of universal love who unconditionally accepts everyone, no matter what.”

If that were the message, Jesus would have ended the narrative there. But he did not, because it is not. While Act 1 shows us the freeness of God’s grace, Act 2 will show us the costliness of that grace and the true climax of the story.

When the elder brother hears from the servants that his younger brother has returned and has been reinstated by his father, he is furious. Now it’s his turn to disgrace the father.

He refuses to go in to what is perhaps the biggest feast and public even his father has ever put on. He remains outside the door, publicly casting a vote of no confidence in his father’s actions. This forces the father to come out to speak to his older son, a demeaning thing to do if you are the Lord of the manor and host of the great feast. He begins to plead with his oldest son to come in, but he continues to refuse.

Why is the older son so furious? He is especially upset about the cost of all that is happening. He says, “You’ve never given me even a goat for a party, how dare you give him a calf?” The fattened calf is only a symbol, however, because what the father has done costs far more than the calf. By bringing the younger son back into the family he has made him an heir again, with a claim to one third of their now diminished family wealth. He’s adding things up. “I’ve worked myself to death and earned what I’ve got, but my brother has done nothing to earn anything, indeed he’s merited only expulsion, and yet you lavish him with wealth! Where’s the justice in that?”

That is why the elder brother refers to his record. “I’ve never disobeyed you! So I have rights!” he is saying, “I deserve to be consulted about his! You have no right to make these decisions unilaterally.”

And so the elder brother’s fury leads him to insult the father even further. He refuses to address him in the elaborately respectful manner that inferiors owed superiors in that culture, particularly in public. He does not say “esteemed Father” but simply “Look” which is equivalent to “Look You!” In a culture where respect and deference to elders was all important, such behavior is outrageous. A modern day equivalent might be his sons writing a humiliating tell all memoir that destroys the father’s reputation and career.

Finally we come to the end,. How will the father respond to his older son’s open rebellion? What will he do? A man of his time and place might have disowned his son on the spot. Instead he responds again with amazing tenderness. “My son,” he begins, “despite how you’ve insulted me publicly, I still want you in the feast. I’m not going to disown your brother, but I don’t want to disown you, either. I challenge you to swallow your pride and come into the feast. The choice is yours. Will you, or will you not?” It is an unexpectedly gracious, dramatic appeal.

The listeners are on the edge of their seats. Will the family finally be reunited in unity and love? Will the brothers be reconciled? Will the elder brother be softened by this remarkable offer and be reconciled to the father?

Just as all these thoughts pass through our minds the story ends! Why doesn't Jesus finish the story and tell us how it ends and what happened! It is because the real audience for this story is the Pharisees, the elder brother and sisters. Jesus is pleading with his enemies to respond to his message. In short Jesus is redefining everything we thought we knew about connecting to God. He is redefining what it means to be lost, and what it means to be saved. There is nobody that deserves God's favor, and yet God's favor in Christ is given us completely by the teller of this parable.

Thanks be to God!