

**Sunday, 6 March 2016**

[what does the love of God look like? Luke 15](#)



## Luke 15

The parable of the prodigal son can be so well known to some of us that we can miss some of the depth of the story Jesus is telling. It seems to begin very simply, "‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them." It seems like a slightly strange request. The sort of request a spoiled child might make, but there is a lot more in those two simple sentences than meets the eye. In Jesus’ culture, for a son to ask for his inheritance before his father died is to spit in his father's face. It is a great insult. Kenneth Bailey spend a good deal of his life trying to understand the Bible by studying the cultures of the Middle East and Mediterranean. He says this,

*"For over 15 years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son's request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has always been emphatically the same... the conversations runs as follows:*

*'Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?'*

*'Never!'*

*'Could anyone ever make such a request?'*

*'Impossible'*

*'If anyone ever did, what would happen?'*

*'His father would beat him of course!'*

*'Why?'*

*'The request means- he wants his father to die.'*

This is an offensive request on many levels. Not only does he essentially wish his father was dead. He also sells his portion of the land. That might not be a big deal to us. We do that all the time. Remember that he is Jewish. In his worldview, this land was given to his family by God. It is the Promised Land. You don't up and sell the land God gave your family. It is to reject your family's values and

traditions. The land isn't just resources. It is his family's inheritance from God. ... Amazingly, his father goes along with the request when he would have had every right to beat him instead.

The son sells his half of the land, takes his money, and leaves. He goes to a 1st century Las Vegas. He lives among the Gentiles and "squandered his wealth in wild living". For some of you I don't have to describe what "wild living" is because you've been there. For others of you I don't have to describe it because you have watched others march off to that other land. Maybe you have siblings, children, or friends who are still there. They try to fill a void in themselves with some sort of pleasure, or some sort of excitement.

As happens, the money runs out. The beer stops flowing. When the beer is no more, the friends are no more. Reality starts to settle in. It takes a little while to hit rock bottom. First, he tries to make it work. He gets a job as a pig feeder. It's an awful job for a Jewish boy. It's a job that would make him unclean- literally and religiously. But,... he has his pride, he can make a go of it. He works hard, for little pay. He gets thinner, and more desperate, and moves closer to rock bottom. Eventually he is desperate. He is out of options.... but he can't return to his father, not after what he did, he couldn't face him. The prodigal son is left in that lonely place that some of us will recognize from our past. ... You are all alone in the world. You have run out of options. You are between a rock and a hard place. There doesn't seem to be any light in your tunnel. In fact it doesn't seem like a tunnel at all. It seems like a room... a prison.

In that place of desperation options become available only once our pride has been completely humbled. What we would never consider before starts to become a possibility. He would rather feed pigs, and eat what the pigs are eating, rather than return home. But, .... eventually ... things get so bad that he starts longing for the food he's feeding the pigs. Starvation is a powerful motivator. The

prodigal son comes to a fork in the road. Stay and die, hungry for pig slop, ... or take a chance and try to return home.

He could never return home as a son, but maybe he could come back as a servant. At least they ate well. He starts to prepare for his desperate journey. How can he face his father after acting so disgraceful, after turning his back on his tradition and family? On the long road home he rehearses what he will say. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants." Over and over he said the words, like a mantra, visualizing himself home, but not home. Serving at the family table, but not eating at it. Taking orders from his father and older brother, but not as before, now as a servant, as a slave, not as a son and a brother. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants."

When he was able to see the family farm he saw the outline of his father in the distance. Suddenly his father was running- a very undignified thing for the head of a noble family. Don't look him in the eye. Maybe he will have mercy. Just take the beating.

As the son braces himself for the father's wrath his father picks him off the ground and throws his arms around him and kisses him. Surprised, the son starts his mantra, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" ... the father interrupts him, he doesn't get a chance to finish the mantra he has practiced every step of his journey.

The father commands the servants "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Of course this is a parable Jesus tells to let us know about the limitless love of God. It is scandalous love. It is love that even seems to defy justice. It is not what the son deserves, but this doesn't have anything to do with the son. It has everything to do with a loving father getting his son back. He pours out his abundance on him and throws a party.

The son did not understand the father. The son expected what was fair. If any mercy was shown it would have been in allowing his face to be shown around the farm as a slave, but not as a son. The son did not understand his father's love. He thought his sin was greater than his father's love.

As a priest I sometimes meet people who really don't believe that God has forgiven them. They really believe that what they have done is greater than God's willingness to forgive. Some think they can't come to church until they get their lives straightened out. As if they have to make themselves good before they can walk through the doors, or lightning will hit them. In this parable Jesus is telling us that nothing is further from the truth. God's love is more abundant and more powerful than our sin. God is overjoyed at our return to him.

Some of us can relate a little more easily to the older brother. He did what was responsible. He stayed home and fulfilled his obligations. For the older brother, the younger brother should come in the back door with his head hung low,... if he is let in at all. He should live on bread and water and live in the barn and feel ashamed. Some of us think the older brother's right. After all, here he is obediently working the farm while his little brother is doing who knows what with who knows who. It's not fair. Where is his party? Seeing his brother get welcomed back with open arms after spitting in his family's face fills him with jealousy, and anger, and bitterness. He is resentful.

"Look!", he says to his father. "All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I

could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

The older brother is just saying what is fair, what is just, what is the expected norm for how families work. The younger son should be taught a lesson, he should be punished, maybe even banished, ... but a party?!? That doesn't make any kind of sense.

Here we see that even the older brother misunderstands his relationship to his father. The younger son rejects his father and runs thinking there must be greener fields elsewhere. There's more fun to be had, and a better life to be lived somewhere away from his father. ... That God stuff is boring. It's not my thing.

The older brother has stuck it out at the farm, but is equally lost. He sees working with his father as slavery. "I've obeyed" he says. "I've followed your orders", "All these years I've been slaving for you". This is not a father-son relationship. The older son alienates himself from his father by considering his work slavery and drab obedience. This is a master-slave relationship. The older son is poisoned by contempt. He has now alienated himself from his father's home. He speaks harshly to him, when he's in the midst of hosting a party. He refuses to enter his father's house because of his younger brother's party. Perhaps he was even a bit jealous that he was out doing all the things he wasn't allowed to do. It seems the father really has two prodigal sons. The older son was physically present, but in his heart he had wandered away from his father. He had made himself a slave and lost his joy. ... The father is generous and loving towards both of them.

The Pharisees and religion scholars of his day had a problem with Jesus hanging out with sinners. He's running with a bad crowd. He can't be as religious as he presents himself. Jesus tells three parables in response to this accusation. The first is a parable about a shepherd who finds a lost sheep. The second is a parable about a woman who finds a lost coin. And this parable is the third. They all have

the same message. The one who is looking is filled with joy at finding what was once lost and throws a party. In all three parables God is the one who is looking, and God is the one who is overjoyed at finding those who had been lost. So here Jesus is surrounded by "sinners" who are being healed and transformed. The Pharisees seem blind to the changes taking place. The three stories are Jesus' way of asking if they will join the party. God's power is manifesting and they are looking for what is wrong. There is a garden full of beautiful flowers in front of them and all they see is the one weed. They are so focused on sin they miss seeing God's action.

As we meditate on this parable we are to see ourselves in it. Are we the wanderer? The broken son who hit rock bottom? Who hit the end of our power to find that we have been looking in all the wrong places? Are we the one who returned to the Father's house to be welcomed home with open arms, forgiven and honoured? ... Or, are we the older brother? We have always done the responsible thing, but we don't really feel like we've gotten our due. We give and give and we feel like we get nothing in return. We become angry, bitter, and resentful. I've met people who feel this way who have been in the church their whole lives, but find themselves feeling jealous when someone who has been living a rough life of addiction has a dramatic conversion experience and returns to the church full of excitement. ... Both of them misunderstood their Father. Both of them underestimated the extent of God's love.

There is one other way to see ourselves in this story. We can dare to see ourselves as the father. We can reflect the Father's love. We can welcome the broken home with opened arms not asking anything of them. We can shower them in love for sheer joy at their return. We can lovingly plead with the bitter and resentful who see themselves as used up slaves, who want nothing to do with their

brother. We can find ourselves so grounded in God's joy that our lives are transformed. We have no need to grasp for power for fear of losing it. We have no need to grasp for the world's idea of success, or popularity. We are secure in our Father's home. Fear is gone and our identity is found in the love of our Father who loved us so much he sent his son to come bring us home. It is there that we can find the love to show others. If we are bold, we can be imitators of the Father, pouring out our love on those who have become lost in sin. But this will only be possible when we realize how deeply and profoundly our heavenly Father loves us.

AMEN