

“The Gracious Father”

Deuteronomy 21:18-21; Romans 6:1-10;
Luke 15:11-32

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A father was sitting down to eat breakfast. He had his hot cereal before him as his oldest son comes wandering through, quickly grabbing some bread and some cheese and heading toward the door. The father said, “Son, come and sit. Let’s have breakfast together.” The son answered, “I need to get over to the briar patch field. The workers are coming. I need to be there when they arrive.” The father says, “It’s all right if you’re not there when they come. You will be there in time. Come, sit, have breakfast.” “No, father, I’ve got to be there.” And he scoots out the door.

The father watches him go down the path. He knows that later that day they will have another conversation as he goes out to see how they are doing in the field. They are almost done, and he suggests the next field for them—Uncle Joe’s field. He sees the son shake his head. It’s obvious that’s not where he wants to go next. If he just follows the fields, it’s much more efficient, but the father knows that the grain is ripening at different rates, and so he says Uncle Joe’s. And the son says yes, but the father sees the glower and he walks away.

As the father walks away, he looks down the road as he has done so many times over these last years, always with this hope that he would see a speck in the distance. Always with that hope. He looks back. He’s looked back with that longing and hope for a long time, as well, wishing it were different. Then one day, well, you know the rest of the story. He sees the younger son coming back. I have added a prequel to the Prodigal Son.

We often call this parable The Prodigal Son. However, as I, and others recently as well, read this story again we recognize that there are three players, you might say, in this particular parable and yet we focus on two of them. We generally focus on the prodigal and then we’ve begun to realize there’s also the elder son. But what about the father? It feels to me like this father sat there with longing over both sons.

Why in the world, in the first place, when his younger son came to him, did he say “OK, here’s your money.” He let him make his own decisions. He let him head off. And he let the older son make his decisions.

We have a father watching and waiting with love for his two sons. I really think the parable should be called The Gracious Father, because the father is the one who is doing the caring, watching for the sons to come to a point where he can

actually turn them around and have a real relationship with them, encouraging them to get beyond the visions they have.

What are those visions? If we think about the younger son, he seems to have one vision to begin with: What can I do with all this cash? Now that I'm rich, what can I do? It's interesting that the way the scripture is translated, it translates that he went off and squandered it all on dissolute living, whatever that is. Going back and looking at the term, one of the ways you can translate that is "senseless." I happen to like that translation a lot, because what it means is you simply go off and begin to do – there was a song once – do what comes naturally. Or you do what everybody else does; you follow along with the crowd because you assume that's what's good. You assume that because you're rich, you're going to be satisfied. It sounds like he went off thinking that now that he was rich he would be satisfied, so he starts spending his money in ways that he thought might satisfy him. Soon the money ran out.

This is not an unusual story. We hear of sports stars that have all this wealth, and at the end of their life they are indigent. We hear of movie stars, we hear of people winning the lottery, we hear of derivative traders. All they can do is spend it as fast as they make it, living senselessly.

You know, when I think about that phrase "senselessly" I don't just think of folks who have not done the same thing that I have. Sometimes I think that's one of the reasons we call this the prodigal son, because we think, "This is about people who have done those things that I didn't do." So if we call it the prodigal son, it's always about somebody else, as long as I'm not the prodigal. It's like a pastor friend of mine said: we really like those sermons that go over our heads and hit somebody else.

So there's a good reason to call this the Prodigal Son if we aren't prodigals. I suppose if we were prodigals, we might want to call it The Eldest Son because then it would focus on him. But I find even in thinking about this youngest son, though I don't think I've done a number of the things that we assume that the younger son might have done, I can see in myself a certain senseless living. I certainly grew up in a way that I expect had a certain set of expectations as I went into adulthood. I remember there was a time I dreamed that if I just had a Camaro, I would be happy. We have to find our way to getting beyond some of the things we do just because we grew up with a particular way of seeing things. Getting beyond the senseless and beginning to think about what it means.

So what did it say when the youngest son decided to return to his father? He came to his senses. He began to look at what really made sense for his life. So if the youngest son was the senseless son, who was the oldest son? I'm not

sure he was sensible. I would rather say he was a little calculating. He lived with his father. He says, "I was a slave to you." It sounds to me like he was calculating. "As long as I obey, I'll get it all." Is that what the father wanted?

It comes to a head when the younger son comes home and the true values of the father are clear. It's about loving your sons. It's not about the stuff. So when he goes out to the older son, he invites him to come in. He knows he's breaking the tradition. We read that piece from Deuteronomy which is so hard for us to hear these days. I could make a case for it to be a movement of grace that this parable completes, but the oldest son isn't ready to hear. Notice the father invites him to recognize "he is your brother as much as he is my son," and in that invited him back into the relationship, to get beyond the calculations about what he might gain from being the elder son and into a relationship of a family.

I can relate to this one, too. Knowing that I have tried to do good things, shouldn't I be rewarded? That very attitude of not being able to look beyond and let go gets in the way of the relationships I might have, the joy we might share. After all, there's a celebration going on. It could be a lot of fun. But no, it's not the way I want it done.

It's interesting; we are left wondering what that elder son does. We know what the father does. The father is the one who brings grace and invites the sons and daughters to come and be a family. So we have this parable about a Gracious Father and about these kids that don't quite seem to get it. What about us? Do we?

Gracious God, did those sons notice their father in the morning, at noon, or at night? Did they recognize the goodness they were given each day, not only at the party? Lord, what about us? You are with us morning, noon, and night. May we notice your goodness, the beauty around us, the grace you've shared, and through it the hope we have based in the love you have given us. You invite us, whether we have been prodigals or older sons, to see again how Christ would lead us. Forgive our sin, and guide us again into the life you would lead us to—a life together, a life of joy. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.