

“Join the Party”
Psalm 32;
Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

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I am very excited to get to preach this word this morning. This is one of my favorite sections of scripture. As I mentioned before, Luke 15 is all about lost things being found. Really, that could be Luke’s Gospel as a whole. Some commentators have called Luke’s Gospel the Gospel of the outcast. It is a Gospel that is littered with stories of those who don’t belong finding their way into Jesus’ community, either because he goes out and grabs them, because they call out to him, or because his disciples find them. But over and over again, those who were on the outside, those who have been disqualified for some reason, find their way home in Luke’s Gospel—again and again and again. In many ways, this story that we are reading, this story that Jesus is telling us here of two lost sons, is a story that almost functions as the whole of Luke’s Gospel.

I also want to acknowledge that this is a very familiar story to many of us. In the church I won’t say that familiarity breeds contempt. Familiarity sometimes breeds distraction. Sometimes we’ve heard a story before, and we’ve heard many sermons about a story before. If you’re like me, you might be thinking about what’s happening after church during that story. You might be moving on to some degree because it’s something that you’ve heard before. I invite you this morning to let the Holy Spirit tell you a new thing, to have a fresh invitation to you today. I won’t say that I’m going to say anything new because if I were, that might be problematic. But I’m going to say that maybe God has something new to say to you this morning, and I invite you to enter into that possibility, even in a familiar piece of text.

I’m not going to go through the passage verse by verse, but definitely theme by theme. I think there’s a lot to unpack in this section. One of the reasons I want to do that here is that I have a sense that stories concerning families are often very cultural. The way we treat each other in families, the rules of families, often vary culture by culture. As a way to help us understand that, has anyone here seen the movie “Crazy Rich Asians?” It’s very popular right now. If you haven’t seen it, it’s hilarious. Please go see it. It might be the best thing I tell you to do this morning. Go see “Crazy Rich Asians.” It’s really good.

There’s a point in this movie where a son, whose family lives in Singapore, has come to the United States and met a Chinese American woman and he brings her back to meet his family. He has never mentioned to her that his family is insanely wealthy and has all this power and prestige. He brings her back and she gets to meet his mom. His mom starts asking her questions about her and her family. At one point this woman from America says, “My mom made all these sacrifices so that I could be what I wanted to be. She just wanted me to be happy.” The Chinese mom then gets a very stern look on her face and says, “Oh, how American of you.”

This creates the tension for the rest of the film, because for the mom in Singapore, there’s a sense that this woman isn’t Chinese. She isn’t Asian. She’s American. Her mom just wanted her to be happy? She just wanted her to find herself? She’s American. I did not send my son to find an American. It’s this moment where as an outsider in this culture, I’m watching that and thinking, “I don’t understand everything that’s happening here but I’m really glad that somebody is helping me enter in.”

I think in this story from Luke, there are a lot of themes about family that are universal. There are some things that made a lot more sense to Jesus' audience than they do to us hearing it now. So I'm going to do my best to help us unpack it so that we can apply it. We're going to unpack what it meant then so that we can see what it means today.

Let's start off with the son in the field. The older son is working in the field like a good older son would. As he's coming back after his day of work, he hears music. Music is being played. There's dancing. There's celebrating. Now, if I played my music really loud at my house, my neighbors might complain. They might call the police if it was loud enough. But what they would not do is assume they had been invited to a party. This is not true in first century Jerusalem. In first century Israel, if you hear music playing, that means the whole city is invited. That is what was intended to happen here. The father is overjoyed that his son has come back. He's killed the fattened calf. There's plenty to eat. The food is out; the music is playing. If you hear it, you are invited to come. You don't need to know why. You don't need to know the point of the celebration. You don't even have to like that younger son very much to come and eat the food, but you need to come and celebrate. It is a party and everyone is invited.

The proper response here for an older son would be to rush in and see what he could do to help. It is his job to co-host the party. It is his role in society to be a co-host of his father's party. He doesn't have to know why there is a party. It's his job to be at the party and do what he needs to do there. So our first clue that there's something wrong in the heart of the older son is that he hears the celebration and his first response is suspicion. This is one of those universal themes. There's something wrong in our hearts when we see someone else celebrating and we ask what's wrong. But I sense maybe I've done that a couple of times in my life. When we see someone celebrating, we say, "What's wrong with that person? What's going on there?"

Rather than enter into the party, the older son starts to investigate what's going on. When he finds out his brother has returned, he ignores his role as the older son. He disavows his role as the older son and plants himself right in that field and doesn't move. So now we are entering into a place where this father, who has already had one son ask for his inheritance and leave, now has another son who is refusing to be his son in this really important moment. A proper response here would have been to lock the door and let him sit in that field for a while; or to say, "I don't have a son in that field anymore"; or to go out there and grab him by the ear and bring him inside. Maybe some of us had parents that would have done that.

What the father does is to go out and plead with his son to come inside. I think this is one of those moments when the original audience would have been shocked. You don't plead with a petulant son who won't come inside. You don't ask him to come inside. You bring him inside or ban him from inside, but you don't plead.

For the second time in one day, this father embarrasses himself for the sake of his children. First, he ran out to the younger son, put a robe on him, hugged him. He embraced this son that everyone knew had shamed him. He ran out shamelessly to say to the entire community, "Put the best robe on him. Give him my ring. Everyone needs to know this is my son and I love him." I'm pretty sure at that point the whole community is like, "That father is a little loosey-goosey with his kids." And then, he runs into the field and begins to plead with his older son to come home. For the second time in one day, his children have put him in a place to be embarrassed and rather than lean away from it, rather than reclaim his position and authority, he has leaned into the embarrassment.

This makes me think about grace. If God forgives us over and over again, but we carry the mantle of Christian, isn't God signing up to let us drag his name through the mud over and over again? To let us embarrass him? It isn't that hard to find. Read a newspaper. We find ways to embarrass God all the time. We invent new ways, or we just make old ways even better. Yet, God embraces that because that is the crazy nature of grace—the father who runs out again and again to these sons.

After he's done pleading, the son gives his speech. It strikes me that these brothers are really good at giving speeches. Have you ever rehearsed telling somebody off? I'm pretty sure these brothers are experts at rehearsing asking for forgiveness or telling people off. But, he tells off his dad. In his language, we get more clues as to what's going on inside of his heart. We get words in his language like "slaving," "never disobeying orders," and of course the classic, "Your son."

Let's start with slaving and never disobeying orders. What strikes me about this is the son is not using language that is familial in nature. He's not saying, "I'm your son and you don't love me enough." He's not saying, "I'm your son; you don't treat me well." He's not saying, "I'm the heir and you're giving away my part to this guy." Even that would be familial language. Instead, he starts listing off what he does. "I work hard for you. I never disobey orders, and you have never compensated me with a goat." It sounds a little bit more like an employee talking to his boss than it does a son talking to his father. It sounds like a union rep talking to the manager, not like a son talking to his dad. In his very language, he is telling us the nature of what he believes his relationship with his father is, and it's not a relationship of father and son. It's a relationship between an employee and a boss.

To further show us how distant his language has become, he uses that "your son" language. He is not only saying, "To me, you are like my boss," he is saying, "I'm not even part of this family." "That son of yours. You and him are a family, and I'm an employee just waiting to inherit the money someday. And it would be great if I could get a goat once in a while." This is brutal language.

It is so easy for us to read this story of these two sons and to look at the offense of the younger son and say, "I can't believe the father would let him back in. I can't believe he would do that!" It's over the top. He's taking the money. He's spending it on prostitutes. He wasted all that money! Then we look at the older son and say, "He's a little better." But I think if we step into first century family culture what we see here is that both sons are saying the same thing. You're not my dad. Just give me what's mine. You're not my dad. This is a repeat of the younger son's offence. It's just happening inside the gates instead of outside the gates and it's a little bit harder to see.

A couple of commentators had some thoughts about this that I thought were helpful. One of them was: The difference between the older and the younger brother is that the younger brother was estranged and rebellious when absent from the house, but the older brother was estranged and rebellious in his heart while he was in the house. This is the one that really got me: The older son's obedience has always been based on a misunderstanding. My dad is pleased with me because I do the work. I get paid because I put in the hours. Someday all of this will be mine. He never understood. And that lack of understanding led to an obedience that made him cold, made him hard, made him unhealthy and unwell.

So the father responds with a speech of his own. While never apologizing, the father tries to reshape his son's understanding of the nature of their relationship. He begins by saying, "All I

have is yours.” He’s saying, son, understand. You’re talking about goats; I’m talking about everything. You’re talking about having a good birthday party. You could have all of this. There’s nothing that is mine that isn’t yours. There’s nothing that’s yours that isn’t mine. You are my son; you are not an employee. You don’t have a section of this. You don’t get paid every two weeks. This is all yours. I am yours. All of this belongs to you. Will you reshape your understanding of faithfulness and labor and work? Will you reshape your understanding of what it means to be part of this family by understanding that you are my son and I withhold nothing from you?

Then he shifts into “this brother of yours” which is obviously a direct mirror to “this son of yours” in the previous section. To understand that all I have is yours, you need to understand that we are a family. Your brother belongs to you, you are mine, he is ours, and you are his. The effort to obscure the reality that we are one family together, that we belong to each other, that we are shaped by something different than what we bring to the table, our obligations, who put in the most hours, or who produces the most is faulty. It is a lie and you have to move on from it to be part of this family. This brother of yours has come home, and we celebrate.

And then, Luke’s favorite language—lost and found. We celebrate in this house when people come home. We celebrate our family. We celebrate when we lost someone and they return to us. All I have is yours. He is your brother. In this home we celebrate.

I can only imagine the Pharisees hearing this, outside of the party, outside of eating with tax collectors and sinners, not so sure about that last point. I think that leads us to what makes this such a hard text. It just ends. Am I the only one who is bothered by the fact that it just ends right here? When the coin is lost and the woman finds it, there is a party. When the sheep is lost, the shepherd finds it and there is a party. When the younger son comes home (not found, by the way, but comes home), there’s a party. There’s a celebration. But when this older brother hears this invitation, when he is found in the field, it just ends. It is entirely unsatisfying. I think the reason it just ends is because we don’t know what happens to the Pharisees.

In Luke’s Gospel, no Pharisees convert. No older brothers, dutiful but not understanding who they are in God’s eyes, come to follow him. It’s an unresolved story because it is an unresolved story. It’s an unresolved story because Jesus could point to a hundred people that are outside, living in debauchery and came home. (Probably 99 of them backslid, but 100 came home.) But he couldn’t find one who came in from the field in the work that he had done to that point, so the story just ends. For us as readers, we don’t see a Pharisee come home until Acts with Paul.

That makes me feel a little uneasy. Does it make you feel uneasy? There is this father going out and saying, “You can come home. You don’t have to hold this bitterness in your heart. You don’t have to be treated like a servant. You don’t have to think of me as a boss or taskmaster. Come back. Remember who you actually are.” We are left wondering if anyone can actually do that, or is everyone doomed who takes on this identity to sit in a field forever.

It’s in that moment that I begin to ask myself the question that maybe you’ve been asking yourself since the sermon started. So, which brother am I more like? I think for me, honestly, if I look in the mirror today in 2018, I’m way more like the older brother than I am like the younger. Now, I had some younger brother years—don’t get me wrong. I left the faith for a while and I had a good time in that foreign country for a little bit. But it didn’t work, as those things tend to not work. I had a moment of coming home, and it was like the younger brother. I came home thinking I would just come home and become a Christian again, sit in the corner, try to be a

good boy for a while. Instead, it's like no, you're in, start loving people, start doing ministry, be part of a community, grace is here, have a good time. I'm like, "I don't deserve all of this. This is amazing." And for a while it just felt amazing. I don't deserve this. I don't deserve to be part of this family. Why am I not being treated like a servant? That's all I'm good for. but at some point that began to shift.

I think for me, like the younger brother, it didn't shift by getting mad at God, by thinking God wasn't fair, by asking God to treat me differently. It started by getting a little bit angrier at my siblings. It started by looking at other Christians and not loving what I saw, and starting to define myself by the ways I wasn't them. I didn't do evangelism the way they did it. I was more justice-oriented than them. I was more conservative than them. I was more liberal than them. I cared about the Bible more than them. I wasn't as stodgy about the Bible as they were. Whatever it was, I began to find my identity in how much better I was performing than they were.

At first, it was just the mysterious "them." Since I worked on college campuses, let's be real. They were campus ministries that weren't mine. But then it started to shift to people within my community who didn't put in the same amount of work that I did, who weren't as faithful as me, who didn't attend as many meetings as I did, who didn't go on the mission trip that I went on, they didn't make the same sacrifices that I did. You know what, though? I don't think it's possible to be mad at a sibling and not eventually get mad at the parent. I began to think, "God, this is hard. I work hard. I make sacrifices, and I don't know if you're really looking out for me. I don't know if you really are taking care of me." In my heart of hearts I could say, "God, I don't know if you're living up to your end of the bargain."

Has anyone here, in an honest moment with God, felt like God wasn't living up to his end of the bargain? Which means, how in the world do you come home? We are stuck with a text that doesn't give us any clue how to come home.

There are a couple of things I have been thinking about. One has been Sabbath. Sabbath is a weird one to talk about in a passage about Pharisees, since Jesus brought up the Sabbath to the Pharisees all the time. I don't think it's like the rule-based Sabbath of the Pharisees. I think it's the rest and the love of God that we're invited to. I find that when I stop resting in the love of God, I begin to be bitter toward God for making me work so hard. Now, God never told me to stop resting. I stopped resting because there was so much to do. But I become bitter about God. So I invite you, if you resonate at all with the older brother, to consider a Sabbath, to consider a complete day of rest in God. One of the things I found that I needed to do in my really strong "older brother" times is to listen to the music I listened to in 1999 when I first became a Christian. I have to read the books that mattered to me when my heart was alive and soft. I need the things that remind me of the moment when my heart was inclined and soft and malleable and less critical.

My second idea is that if you need to come inside, go to the party. Go to the party! If you have a hard time with Christians, spend more time with other Christians. If you're like me and are critical of other ministries, maybe you shouldn't go to church here next week. You should go to church there next week. If you have criticism of people at this church, have coffee with them today. Now you're going to be really nervous if someone stands next to you in coffee hour. "What's that person's problem with me?" The point is, don't wait until your heart is good to go to those places. Go to those places and see that it makes your heart good.

In this community, we have The Bible Project small groups. Join one. If you don't like the person leading it, all the better. You have been working really hard, but stop working for a while and join the party. Celebrate until your heart is ready to celebrate. Join in until you feel ready to join in. We have to see that older brotherism is not something that we can play with. It's not something we can hold onto just a little bit. It wants all of our heart, and we need to get all of it out of our hearts.

My two thoughts this morning are spend time with the father and remember who he is, and spend time with each other and remember that we are all family together. We don't need to ignore our differences. Healthy families fight a lot. Unhealthy families disown. I think we need to remember that we are not disowned by our father. We can't disown our father and we can't disown our siblings. God made us one big dysfunctional, weird, twisted, somewhat oddly shaped family, but it is his family and we get to be part of it. That is a grace in our lives, and may we recapture that grace again. Amen.