

Together Again

David A. Baer

Fourth Sunday in Lent (C)
March 31, 2019

Text: Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

OK, I've got a pop quiz for you on the parable of the prodigal son. Now this should be easy, because the story is fresh in your mind. So here's one question, multiple choice, and we'll see how you do. According to the story, which of these is the most immediate cause for the prodigal son being in need in the far country? A) He spent all his money in "dissolute living"; B) There was a famine in the country; C) He was set upon by robbers; or D) None of the above?

If you said A, the dissolute living, you're in good company...

New Testament scholar Mark Allan Powell conducted an experiment, where he asked one hundred American seminary students to read this passage in pairs, and then to close the Bible and recount what they had just read.¹ Of the one hundred seminary students, only six of them mentioned the famine. All one hundred mentioned the dissolute living. For the American seminarians, the famine was an incidental detail that didn't really matter. Presumably the son would have been OK, if he had just done a better job with his property.

On the other hand, when you read this text with people outside the United States, they come away with a completely different take. Non-Americans are much more likely to see B, the famine, as the main cause of the prodigal son's distress.

When Mark Allan Powell asked fifty Russians to do the same exercise as the American seminary students, the results were completely different. Forty-two of the Russian readers, or 88%, mentioned the famine, and only seventeen of them, fewer than half, mentioned squandering. For them, the squandering was the incidental detail, and the famine was the bigger deal. One of the Russians said, "So what if he lost his inheritance? ... That just means he would be poor like everyone else. Most people don't have an inheritance to lose. But when the famine came, *that* was a problem."

So why does this matter? What does it matter whether we think the son's irresponsibility or the famine caused his misfortune? Surely it was a bit of both, right? I think it matters, because if we think the parable is a morality play about personal responsibility, then we're more apt to side with the older brother at the end of the story, which is clearly *not* where Jesus would like us to land. We're more likely to be left with the same complaints about justice and fairness, questions about who's deserving of favor, that the scribes and Pharisees brought to Jesus.

What if the prodigal son's sin isn't being an irresponsible spender, but leaving home in the first place? Think about what it means to ask for your share of the inheritance, to say, essentially to your father, "Let's go forward with this *as though you were already dead*." The son broke his family, and broke his father's heart, long, long before he ever broke his bank account.

What if his dissolute living is the natural consequence of cutting himself off from

¹ Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear?: How To Bridge the Gap Between Preacher and Pew*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2007

the relationships that ground him, that show him who he is is defined by those to whom he belongs? And what if losing the protection of his wealth was the only way the son was going to wake up and realize the surpassing value of what he had lost when he left his family? “No one gave him anything,” the story says. And against this heartless indifference of the people of the far country, the son remembers the generosity and mercy of his father. My dad treated his servants way better than I’m getting treated here, he says. That’s what sends him home: the memory of what sort of person his father is.

If you read this story with a sensitivity to personal responsibility and fairness, you’re going to be offended by it. It’s possible to read this story and see the son as feeling genuine remorse. But it’s just as possible to hear him rehearsing his little speech and to think of him as a manipulative villain, to see him as motivated less than genuine remorse than by his empty belly. And when he gets home, when his father not only embraces him and kisses him, but gives him a robe and a ring and sandals for his feet, all these things are coming out of his *brother’s share of the inheritance!* And the piece de resistance is when the father slaughters the fatted calf *that the elder brother had raised!* And then they start the party *while the elder son is still working in the field*, and nobody comes to tell him what’s going on. If you can feel the indignities piling up one on top of another, I think that’s intentional.

If you’ve ever felt like your parents were playing favorites with your siblings, if you’ve ever had a colleague play up your idea—*your idea*—as their own and get rewarded for it, if you’ve been thrilled by the attention and interest of someone in authority only to find out they were just using you for their own purposes, then you know what the older brother feels like. You know what it’s like to be taken for a sucker. And I think the offensiveness of this parable is intentional. I think Jesus knows that the scribes and Pharisees and us and everybody else who hears this is going to recognize that what happens in this family isn’t anything close to what we would call justice and fairness.

If fairness means giving everybody their due, then Jesus isn’t fair. If justice means you’re required to pay back in proportion to the wrong you’ve done, then Jesus isn’t just. There’s some other animating value here that Jesus is trying to play up, as a way of justifying the time and attention and tenderness he lavishes on the wrong sort of people—the tax collectors and sinners. We skipped over two parables in our reading today, but you can find them there in chapter 15 if you look. Before he gets to the prodigal son, Jesus talks about the lost sheep, and a shepherd who leaves the 99 other sheep behind to go find it. It’s crazy. Nobody would do that. But Jesus does. Again, he tells a story about a woman searching for a lost coin in the middle of the night, lighting a lamp and burning up precious oil that surely eats up whatever value the coin has. Crazy! Nobody would do that. But that’s who Jesus is. The value expressed in all these stories is not one where you tally up the costs, where you weigh pro’s and con’s, where you reason out what’s fair and what’s right. The value is in the recovery of what was lost. It’s in the need to celebrate what is broken, severed, separated being made whole again. What matters is not which son is more responsible and deserving of the father’s love. What matters is that the family is together again!

All of us, probably, can seize on an experience of feeling like the older brother. We can lay hold of resentment and grievance in our own stories, and that sense of injustice is powerful. But if I think for a moment, I can also call to mind a time when I hurt somebody badly, and he let it go for the sake of our friendship. I can call to mind a time when somebody turned up unexpectedly at my door with a fresh-cooked meal. I can call to mind a miracle I had no right to expect that turned my life upside down. And

I can call to mind Jesus himself, his arms stretched wide on the cross, looking out at our world, at all of us, whose violence and indifference and sin put him there, and saying, "Father, forgive them." Can you get there too? Can you search your memories and find the times when you've received favor and generosity that you did nothing to earn, far beyond what you had any right to expect? Can you put yourselves in the place of the prodigal, right in that moment when his father races out to throw a big bear hug around him, when his eyes are the size of dinner plates? Haven't you been there too? Why is it so easy to remember the times we've felt like the older brother, and so much harder to remember the times we've felt like the younger?

Let's remember who Jesus' audience is—the scribes and Pharisees. Because the point of this story is not whether you should stay at home or leave. The point of this story is not who deserves what treatment. The open question at the end of the parable is the one Jesus leaves with these religious authorities. The question is whether the elder son is going to join the party. The question is whether we can set aside our resentment, our indignation, our grievance, to live as children of God's grace. The question is whether we can live into the time of Jubilee—release, forgiveness, new beginnings—that Jesus says he came to bring.

There are any number of things in our families, at our jobs, in our communities, and in our nation's life that can activate grievance and resentment. There are even skilled people in politics and advertising who know how to play these feelings up for their own purposes. Somebody else is getting better than they deserve, these voices say. Doesn't that make you angry? At times like these, I want to invite us all to recall Jesus' story and remember that each and every one of us has gotten better from God than we deserve, and that if we want to be in on the party God is throwing for the return of the lost, then this is the identity we need to live by. I am a child of grace. You are a child of grace. We've all received better than we deserve, and God intends for this gift to make us generous with our gifts and generous in spirit.

What would it look like for our hearts to become like God's heart, as we see it in this story? God is the father who searches the horizon, day after day, longing for the return of his lost children, who embraces them, embraces us, warmly and joyfully when we come to ourselves and return home. What was lost is found. The ones who were suffering alone in the far country have come home and found safety and welcome. "We had to celebrate and rejoice," says the father. "Come inside, come sing and dance with us! Come share in the joy!" Amen.