

“A Family Intervention”

Luke 15:1 – 3; 11 – 32

Text: “But we had to celebrate and rejoice; . . .” . . . Luke 15:32a

Family life.

For some of us filled with joy and happy thoughts, wonderful celebrations, family vacations, and great holiday meals together. However, for many, family has been a life of barely functioning . . . well, dysfunction. And probably for all of us, it has been some sort of mix of both.

God understands. One of the most popular, and perhaps misunderstood, of all of Jesus’ teachings is the story of the so-called prodigal son. I say so-called, because this is a story about a totally dysfunctional family. It is a story about God’s family. It is a story about you and I and our relationship to God.

Let’s begin by gathering around Jesus as did the tax collectors and sinners to hear Him teach.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the Scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinner and eats with them.’”

So He told them this parable:”

Wait a minute, there is a curve ball here! Jesus isn’t talking to the audience of tax collectors and sinners who came to hear him. Listen.

“**So** Jesus told them this parable: . . .” The operative word here being “**So**”; meaning, because people – good church people of that day, mind you – grumbled about whom Jesus welcomed and whom He ate with, **so** He told them this parable. **So** . . . these two parables are neither about repentance nor about the God Who won’t give up. Rather, these two parables are about whom you welcome and whom you eat with; and, conversely who you don’t. This Scripture Lesson is about whom you are willing to eat with – not anonymously in adjoining booths at your favorite restaurant, but across the table from, in your home and in your heart. Initially these parables are about who Jesus welcomed and ate with.

And whom might that include? Hmmmmmm . . . How about the fundamentalist, if you’re a liberal; the liberal if you’re an evangelical; the non-believer, if you’ve been born again; the pro-life, if your pro-choice; . . . and we could come up with quite a list if we moved into the political world as the presidential election descends upon us. “Tax collectors and sinners.”

Many scholars suggest that Jesus wasn’t crucified for his theology or His politics. They suggest that Jesus was crucified because of who He associated with. Jesus’ most radical act may have been who He ate with and accepted lodging from, and how He counted on meals at the hands of His hosts and hostesses. The people He associated with

were poor, the hated people of society, the disenfranchised, and the outsiders. Who Jesus welcomed and ate with shocked his contemporaries. It was as if Julie Child had endorsed ***“The Road Kill Cookbook.”***

Many of you know that before I came to this church I was at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in the District. Part of the ministry there is to house a community based transitional homeless shelter. Every night of the year there are 6 homeless men in the church. Every night of the year some local restaurant or family or local church group would prepare them their dinner meal. While the restaurants would prepare the food, the residents of the homeless shelter had to go get it and bring it back. And getting that meal is great. That is – if you will – fulfilling the “Law”. But most of the families and churches on the nights that it was their turn to prepare the meal would stay and share the meal and enjoy fellowship with them; hear their stories, listen to their struggles, especially those battling with addictions and mental illness. Feeding is one thing, talking, listening and sharing is quite another – it gives dignity.

Now, if you have managed to stay with me thus far, hang on a bit more for this scripture has profound implications for us. Namely, it changes how we place ourselves in this story. Let me suggest that the importance of this Scripture is **not in seeing ourselves** as the ones who are lost and at some point found by God, but that we see ourselves as the ones ***who seek the lost***. Like God, we are the only ones who can do a family intervention.

In the early Christian church the word God was made into a verb, as in you “God-ded” me; meaning, you treated me with the qualities we ascribe to God – grace, love, mercy, comfort. Another way of considering this is that we are made in God’s image, and Jesus teaches us to act in ways that are attributes of God. In other words, we are to seek justice and mercy, we are to include the marginalized people of the world, we are to love unconditionally, we are to welcome and eat with “tax collectors and sinners.”

Remember the One Who rejoices in these parables represents God. There are two parables also included in this chapter where we see God as like the shepherd who goes out to seek the lost sheep. God is like a woman who lights a lamp and sweeps a dirt floor and searches carefully to find the coin that is lost.

So consider the surprise twist of these two parables that we might be far more capable of behaviors associated with God than we ever dare imagine. Perhaps we can realize that as ones created in God’s image, we too, can love with no strings attached, that we can search for the lost in our society, and that we can work for justice for others. We too, are called to be more like God than we can imagine. We can do a family intervention – within our own family!

Let’s watch the story unfold.

There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.”

In first century Palestine this is tantamount to asking your father to die. “Father, you are no longer useful to me, I want my share of the inheritance.”

So he (the father) divided his property between them.

Keep this in mind – if the father divided his property between them, the father would be left with nothing.

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

This was not just a trip to Las Vegas. While “dissolute living” may conjure up some fantasies for some of you, for this poor misguided young man, he deliberately spent all his wealth and had nothing to show for it. Zilch. Nada. Nothing.

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

Sometimes Jesus’ stories require us – 2,000 years later – to fill in the gaps. Well, obviously, since Jesus was telling this story to the Pharisees, they would find this abhorrent – as should we all. After all this foreign land was not a Jewish satellite state or they would not be feeding pigs – swine! This job this Jewish younger son of a fairly well to do family, was absolutely the lowest of the low. And the younger son had sense enough to realize he had hit bottom.

He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!”

And the younger son also had sense enough to know that he had ended his family life. His actions with his father and his squandering killed that. But he hoped that if he could be treated as one of his father’s hired hands that would be so much better than what he was experiencing now.

I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”

This is a great confession. We would do well to pattern our own confessions after this. The younger son confessed that he had sinned against God. This is what sin is in its most classic definition – separating yourself from God. What that leads you to do before others is secondary to what you have done to separate yourself from your Creator.

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Wait a minute pops! You're a man of wealth – what are you wearing? That's right robes! And any woman here can tell you can't run in robes like that. You have to hoist them up a bit!

But there is a problem when you do that. You are exposing yourself! And any self-respecting wealthy-land-owning-man would simply never do that! That is simply outrageous behavior. Something we better get used to expecting from a God Who always seeks out, welcomes, and rejoices when the lost are found!

Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

And before the son could finish, the father was so excited to see him, the father cut him off and . . .

But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

Wait a minute. Time out here. Remember at the beginning of this story, I asked you to remember that the father divided the property between both sons. So . . . what does the father have to give to the younger son?!?! I mean, whose robe is it? Whose ring is it? And whose sandals are they? And who owns the fatted calf? Ummmmm, . . . all of that belongs to the older son. It's another of those gaps in Jesus' stories that we need to fill in as the Pharisees would have filled it in when they originally heard it. But no matter.

And they began to celebrate.

What a nice story! The lost younger son is found. The father outrageously throws a big party! Isn't this special?

And wouldn't it be nice if the story ends there?

But it doesn't! And if we are careful we will see that this wonderful story starts a meddlin' in our personal affairs.

‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.”

Customs in those days gave certain responsibilities to the oldest sons. Being a host at special events was one of them. It was the eldest son's responsibility to be the perfect host: to never leave the party; to make sure everyone was welcome; so on and so forth. So it seems like father had jumped the gun. The older brother knew nothing of his younger brother's – oops the younger son's – return. And the fact that he could be so far away to not hear the celebration indicates just how much wealth this family had!

Then he (the older brother) became angry and refused to go in.

And can you blame him? The father had given away **his** robe, **his** ring, **his** sandals, and the fatted calf. What would it mean for God to take away all our symbols of wealth and status to someone who had deliberately squandered everything?

His father came out and began to plead with him.

Wait a minute dad – since you have taken on the role of hosting the party you cannot be a bad host! You are supposed to stay with all the guests and take care of them. You can't leave them alone! It would be a major faux pas and most humiliating! Except to an outrageous God, who always welcomes sinners and eats with them!

But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours . . .

Hmmmm . . . doesn't that also make him a brother of yours??

But when this son of yours . . . came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

Isn't this the same speech you or I would give. After all for us to be in this community; to be good church goers – aren't we the Pharisees – oops, I meant the older son (or, on second thought, maybe I did mean, THE Pharisees). Don't we have a legitimate gripe here??

Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours . . .

Nice corrective dad – to the older son the younger son is and always will be a "brother of yours". And so it is with us. The lost in our communities are always the brothers and sisters of us all – the created sons and daughters of God.

But we had to celebrate and rejoice, [because this brother of yours] was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

This poor older son, he showed us we can get lost by not going anywhere. He always did the “right” thing. But he was totally unable to comprehend a God of grace, an outrageous God who welcomes the lost!

At least the dad got it right!

But we had to celebrate and rejoice!

And the story ends. We don’t know what happens after this. It is another of those yawning gaps in Jesus’ parable. We are left to create the ending. We are left finding our way; and our way will be revealed by who we identify with in the story. Are we a lost son who wasted everything? Are we a coin that is lost? Are we a sheep that got so self-absorbed by grazing and wander away? Somehow, I don’t think those descriptions fit very many of us.

But then there is the elder son – the one who stayed at home and did everything right, and never got justly rewarded. I suspect that is who the Pharisees identified with.

Well, there you have it. Jesus and the Pharisees, those good church folk! More like us than we want to admit. And telling these stories about being in a dysfunctional family – a family so desperately lost and in need of an intervention!

And God seeks them out and welcomes them all!

“But we had to celebrate and rejoice!”

God Celebrates with them all and invites the whole community to join in the celebration!

Outrageous! Simply outrageous. What are we going to do with a God that seeks out, welcomes the lost, and eats with them, even parties with them?

The footnote, we could be like the Pharisees and the other religious leaders of Jesus time. They knew what to do with this Jesus who “welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

They would crucify Him!

And just to confuse you more – because of that crucifixion, our sin is forgiven and we are saved! And so today – with people all around the world, we share a sacred meal commemorating that salvation.