

CALL US WHEN YOU GET THERE

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March 14, 2010

Reading: Luke 15: 11-32

Then Jesus said, “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.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 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 field to feed the pigs. 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!’ 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.’

“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. 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.’ 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!’ And they began to celebrate.

Now his older 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 had killed the fatted calf, because he got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 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 came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 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 was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

While the parable of the prodigal son is probably one of the best known and often told parables of Jesus, I think it is important for us to: (1) place the narrative in the Jewish tradition, and (2) appreciate the cultural issues that couch the story in first century Palestine.

I say we need to place the story in its Jewish heritage because Christians are a little too eager to hijack the prodigal as uniquely Christian gospel. The Hebrew Bible consistently portrays the question of the youngest son usurping the eldest son’s rights to primogeniture and fatherly blessing. Perceiving that his young brother, Abel, is the child of blessing, Cain crushes his skull with a stone. Isaac manages to steal all of the rights of inheritance from Abraham’s first-born, Ishmael. Jacob robs Esau of inheritance and blessing, fooling the elder father Isaac. Jacob’s youngest son, Joseph, is a pampered, spoiled and arrogant child. He is so difficult to live with that his brothers sell him into slavery, and tell the old man that a lion had killed his boy. Finally, consider the elder, Jesse of Bethlehem. Jesse had eight sons. His youngest son, David, would kill the giant Goliath and eventually become King.

The Hebrew Bible constantly sings the songs of the tiny young nation, Israel. God protects Israel from the older and more powerful countries surrounding it. Psalm 9 sings praises to God for rebuking the nations and bringing them to judgment.

Rabbinic *Midrash* on this Psalm tells the story of a king who had two sons. Hear the similarity with the prodigal:

Rabbi Berechiah said in the name of Rabbi Jonathan...The verse means that God has set love of little children in their fathers' hearts. For example, there was a king who had two sons, one grown up, the other a little one. The grown-up one was scrubbed clean, and the little one was covered with dirt, but the king loved the little one more than he loved the grown-up one.¹

We have heard these stories all of our lives and their familiarity rob us of understanding. For example, we are too eager to simply interpret them as sibling rivalry. Or we jump the gospel wagon and insist that Jesus has offered exceptional insight into the love of God. What we forget is that the Hebrew Bible sets up these stories in the face of its own social and historical context. The assumptions of primogeniture, the rightful inheritance of all property to the oldest son (not child), are challenged by the Jewish tradition. Even within the social milieu of Jewish homes and communities, primogeniture was the understood social norm. Yet it is Jewish scripture that turns the values of the familial social order on its head. The young, the poor, the dirty, the disenfranchised, the sinners, the halt and the lame suddenly walk with rich dignity. The parable of the father who had two sons is not a new revelation from the peasant rabbi of Nazareth.

There are several other social and cultural observations about this parable that we need to understand if we are going to interpret this story with any depth. Brandon Scott summarizes these in his book, *Re-Imagine the World*.²

¹ Bernard Brandon Scott, *Re-Imagine the World* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2001), p. 69.

² Ibid, pp. 65-83.

Let us first understand that Deuteronomic law quite clearly states the rightful claim of the eldest son with regards to inheritance. Two-thirds of the property shall go to the eldest son, regardless of likes and preferences. The remaining third is divided up between the remaining sons. The common wisdom of the ancient world would postpone the distribution of the inheritance until the last possible moment; on one's deathbed was considered ideal. Consider these words of Sirach (32: 20-24):

To son or wife, to brother or friend,
do not give power over yourself, as long as you live;
and do not give your property to another,
in case you change your mind and must ask for it.
While you are still alive and have breath in you,
do not let anyone take your place.
For it is better that your children should ask from you
than that you should look to the hand of your children.
Excel in all that you do;
bring no stain upon your honor.
At the time when you end the days of your life,
in the hour of death, distribute your inheritance.

In the case of the father of the prodigal son, the very request of the youngest son is an insult and an outrage. It would be unheard of. And the father would be thought a fool to give the boy one third of his property. It is foolish because the father seems to be in good health. The farm seems to be thriving and why would anyone liquidate a third of its value at such a premature time? It makes no sense economically. You can imagine other landowners gathered at the local tavern saying, "He's lost his mind!" Not only has he put the security of the farm at risk, he has placed his own security in jeopardy.

Obviously the father is a very wealthy man. The story does not tell us that the farm was or would be lost due to his decision to give the boy the inheritance. The farm is large enough that hired hands are needed to work it. When the child returns

home the father is able to bestow gifts of cloaks, sandals, rings, and the fatted calf. Only a wealthy home would offer such a bounty of providence.

The other piece of cultural information that we should be aware of is the absence of the mother. The parable does not mention her life or death. But more to the point the father takes on many of the actions and attitudes of a mother in ancient Palestine. Children in that world had a very remote relationship with the father. The actions of the father in this parable are a stark contrast to the common role of fathers. We read that he was waiting for the son. We can imagine him sitting on the front porch scanning the horizon for the boy's return. He makes several trips to the mailbox to see if a letter or postcard arrives saying, "Wish you were here." In our family we say to those who are traveling, "Call us when you get there."

When he sees the boy coming down the lane to the farm he runs to the child. Even today, dignified gentlemen do not run in the Middle East, unless it is in case of extreme danger. And a man would not put his arms around the boy and kiss him so publicly. The image in the parable is one of copious expressions of love and emotion. He is beside himself with joy. In the social role of his time the father is "acting like a girl."

While feeding swine the boy came to his senses and determined to return home to his father and work as a hired hand. When the father sees the boy he seems to have lost his senses and throws a lavish party. The cloak that he gives to the boy was probably his own. Undoubtedly it was a very expensive garment and suggests that the child will remain under the father's protection as long as the old man lives. The ring is a signet of power and authority, placing the boy back into a position of respect in

the family and community. The sandals declare that he is not going to take the position of slave but that of a free man. In the ancient world slaves did not wear shoes – that was how you kept them on the plantation.

All of these themes are beautifully captured in Rembrandt's painting, "Return of the Prodigal Son." You see the child kneeling at his father's feet with all of the symbols depicted in the parable. If you look closely at the hands of the father you note that one is distinctly feminine, the hand of the absent mother. I don't think Rembrandt had read Brandon Scott. I have a copy of the painting above my desk in my study. You are welcome to step into my study after the service and see Rembrandt's beautiful painting.

Traditionally the church has interpreted the parable of the prodigal as allegory. The father represents the unconditional love of God that is lavishly given to repentant children. The prodigal is any number of people we are quite certain are profligate wastrels. The oldest son is found among those of us who have been good and faithful children all of our lives and have served the Lord with gladness. We need only be reminded that we have never been removed from the love of the father.

I would like to propose that the allegorical interpretation is too vulnerable to sentimentality. As I said in the beginning, Jesus' parable of the father who had two sons follows a strong and consistent message: Our God is the passion for right relationships that overthrows, usurps, and undermines the presumed values of our world, our government, our religion, and our homes. The action of God's kingdom is the subversion of every human claim to status and privilege, regardless of whether it is

based on age or gender, race or economic wealth. There are no entitlements in the Kingdom of God.

I believe that is even true of the righteous and sanctified. In the face of God's justice our relative goodness or sinfulness melts away. There are not some who are saved and some who are damned, some who are elect and others who are predestined to perdition. Every sin and every excuse we could offer up to the father has already been anticipated. All of our confessions and apologies are dust. Our lately realized sense of self-preservation will not save us in the end. Deathbed confessions are not necessary. The equalizing power of God's passion is a priori to all of our excuses. You see, our sins and our confessions have all been anticipated. Indeed, they are quite predictable. Our good deeds and hard work are also duly noted. Yes, church attendance and annual contributions are well known. No question that you have been a good and faithful servant. But none of this is what the parable of the prodigal is all about.

The work of the Kingdom is waiting for the return of those who got lost or took a wrong turn. The work of the Kingdom is welcoming and kissing those who seemed so estranged, be they good or bad. The work of the Kingdom is clothing and sheltering, regardless of whether it was deserved or not. The work of the Kingdom is cooking food, breaking bread together, and singing songs.

Some children will never come home. They will never write or call. They will live estranged and wasted. Some children will be mad because they did not think old so-and-so should be welcomed in the house. But the work of the kingdom goes on anticipating the lost and comforting the angered ones. Either way the Kingdom is

never populated by the people we thought should be there. But God does not care. God keeps fattening up the calves, kneading the dough, and looking out the window. God keeps questioning who should be first and who should be last. God keeps shaking up the guest list just in case somebody presumed that they were chosen to be the Kingdom bouncer.

So don't be mad and stand around in the yard pouting. Come on in! Welcome to the Kingdom! You'll never believe who is coming to dinner.

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