

Sermon on Luke 15 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Luke 15:1-32

The Father's love forms a family.

Ewen and Stacy are in the middle of a project track and making a poster of our family tree - more of a family sphere. Finding ancient relatives that give us the color of our eyes, the shade of our skin, the personalities we exhibit, and the blood our hearts pump for life.

It is storytelling in a way, telling us about ourselves, our roots, or at least where our name came from.

Families are funny things. We don't often choose them. They routinely drive us a bit crazy. But there is a bond that most of the time overrides other categories of connection. We stick with each other, "because we are family!"

This is also why it seems too harsh when Jesus says "if anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters... he cannot be my disciple." Luke 14:26

Not to rehash last week's text. But commitment to the King is not meant to merely rival that of family, it is to stand above it, far beyond it.

His kingdom then is forming a family - a vital community - that those coming to him are meant to enjoy, embrace and celebrate with. But there is idolatry - running after the wrong things - that gets in the way and misses this community.

And this is exactly what we see unfolding in Luke 15.

All parables here. Jesus proves a point by painting on a canvas of rescue - to an audience of curmudgeons.

Luke 15:1-2 "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. [2] And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (ESV)

It's scandalous!

Think of what came immediately before. The invitation into the Kingdom, belonging; told through the image of a banquet. Those making excuses miss out and the "unseen/nobodies" of society have a seat at the table.

It's just too much for the religious elite. They would prefer if Jesus would choose to spend time with cultured people, "holy" people, not the wretched.

But that is exactly who he has come for.

Luke 4:18–19 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, [19] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (ESV)

The Pharisees and scribes were angry with Jesus for welcoming tax collectors and sinners (see 15:1-2) because they failed to understand God's heart. He longs for the lost to be found. He's filled with joy when a single sinner repents and a relationship is restored.

So he tells them parables - the first two, like stretching a canvas to a frame before painting the masterpiece that is the last parable.

This canvas then is one of Kingdom and the value of those lost. What are people worth?

He begins with the lost sheep. "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, to go find the one that is lost."

Of course in the story the sheep are people. As insulting as describing us in comparison to this dumb animal prone to falling off cliffs and wandering away from the herd might be. And this image of sheep would not have been foreign to them. He promised to rescue his sheep!

Ezekiel 34:11–12, 16 "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. [12] As a shepherd seeks out his flock

when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness...[16] I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.” (ESV)

The shepherd invites his friends to rejoice that the sheep is back!

Luke 15:7 “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (ESV)

Straightforward, good that the lost sheep is found and brought back. Good that sinners are found and brought in.

But it’s a striking story because there are two absurdities in this parable. First, no one would have 100 sheep! We should be surprised if even one man among the audience had the wealth to own a herd of this size. When Jesus says, “what man of you...” They lean in to listen because they are made out to be richer than they are! This is beyond what is normal.

The second absurdity is leaving the valuable 99 unprotected! In open country.

To those listening in the first century, it would have been reckless of the shepherd to leave the mass while running after one stray. They would think the rich man should just count it as a loss on the year-end report and move on.

“It is simply too risky to leave behind ninety-nine to search for one when someone with those means could easily just acquire another sheep. Why care so much about something that is replaceable?” Lamar Hendrick

Jesus is saying, “that which you see as a waste, a lost cause, is what Messiah has come to pursue.”

Their view of Kingdom community is the 99 “righteous” that don’t need to be rescued. They are the ones that have stayed home - the well-behaved sheep.

Lest they grumble that he is on again about the poor and disabled - he brings it home with the lost coin. Ten drachmas, one is missing. They can relate to this. One day's wages is lost, of course, you would find this coin.

The woman turns the house upside down for it, then when it is found she invites friends to celebrate.

Luke 15:10 "Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (ESV)

This is the kingdom he is building, rescued sinners, lost that are found, made family. He values the lost, he came for them. If he stopped there the Pharisees may have assumed they were the coins - but from this canvas he paints a fuller picture of his grace, his mercy, and love.

Jesus gives us the most studied parable in Scripture, highlighting the dangers that wreck the community he is creating, and the solution to them.

The Idolatry of Immature Immorality

Here we have a family. A man with two sons.

The younger brother, who we might think is the star of the parable - at least how we have most often read it, wants out.

We don't know the reasons behind the decision but we can assume. He knows he doesn't have the privileged place of his brother. He might want to strike out on his own, prove himself. He just needs the cash for it. Or it could be as simple as he was sick of working the land for his father.

Whatever the motivation, it wasn't enough to just be a son. He is rejecting the father. His love, provision, identity. You have heard it said that this type of request would be like saying "I wish you were dead!"

But he demands his share of the property.

Absurd - You think eating with sinners is scandalous, no, a son asking for his inheritance is scandalous! A first-century father would have, upon this request, typically beat the son and driven him off with curses.

The father in this story is different. And he divided his property between them.

One-third of his property. Cattle, land. But the son doesn't stay to work the land, he cashes it in.

"Gathered all he had" connotes selling his portion. With the profits, he journeyed to a far country where he squandered his property in reckless living.

In his immaturity, he rejects what is right and good and follows his heart. Lives his truth. Defines who he is for himself. He is convinced that this new life will fulfill. He is impatient, despising what he had.

Zero love for the father. That relationship wasn't enough to bring him happiness. The family wasn't worth it.

He didn't want the father, he wanted his father's stuff.

Tim Keller - "What is an idol? It is anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give." So in this parable, idolatry is that which absorbs the son's heart more than the father.

We don't even have to be a tax collector or sinner (though we are) to get this.

"I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found." – Henri J.M. Nouwen,

Turning away from the father, rejecting him. Reckless living - immorality. The older brother accuses him of prostitution - but any way you slice it - it is a bad life.

The kind of life that leaves you bankrupt. Financially, emotionally, and spiritually.

When he spent everything there is famine, hires himself out to feed pigs.
Unclean, wrong.

We get how low this... we can eat pigs but we don't want to feed them!

It was so bad he wanted to eat the same pods the pigs got. "...and no one gave him anything." (v. 16) Absent community, no friends, no family... because of his immorality, he has lost it all.

His newly acquired freedom had come at a high cost. Sometimes God lets us experience a tremendous fall because that's what it takes to open our eyes.

We expect the next sentence of the story to be "and he died lonely and starving." But that's not the type of story this is.

At his lowest "he came to himself." He thinks that surely as a servant in my father's house I would be better off. So he scripts his repentance, his vulnerability. And he returns home.

The father sees him still a long way off and runs to embrace him. Falling on his neck.

Luke 15:21 "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'" (ESV)

Before the son can even finish his scripted speech the father lavishes grace on him. He throws a party for 75 and celebrates.

Luke 15:24 "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate." (ESV)

Immature immorality keeps him from community but there is hope in turning - coming to the father. It's why all the tax collectors and sinners are around. It's why the banquet is for all those who will come.

This is a beautiful picture of salvation and the restoration of erring saints. A destitute sinner comes to a holy God in repentance and faith with nothing to offer but desperate need. God the Father responds with love and compassion (15:20),

granting the sinner all the privileges of sonship in the family and showering him with blessings.

What are the Pharisees thinking? ‘Dumb old man!’

But Jesus doesn’t give them a beat to think. He knew their hearts and he unmasks the idolatry that keeps them from community too.

The Idolatry of Mature Morality

The story is called the prodigal son, but alas, there are two sons, and the older brother is likely who Jesus wants the Pharisees to recognize.

Faithfully working and as he comes back home he hears music and dancing. Calls a servant over to find out what was going on.

Luke 15:27 “And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ (ESV)

Where we want the older brother to be relieved and joyful that his little brother is back... he takes a different tack.

He was angry and refused to go in.

The older brother tells the father exactly why he is angry. And maybe it resonates with you.

Luke 15:29–30 “he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. [30] But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ (ESV)

The younger son feels unworthy, but the older son is convinced that he is worthy and that the father has been unfair.

“This son of yours...” Not a brother.

The same problem of a different color. The older brother ruins community and rejects family because the father celebrated his lost son.

He was moral - obedient, patient - but just like the younger brother what he desires is the father's stuff, not the father.

So many of Jesus' parables tell of a person that receives but get indignant when someone else receives the same or more. Because it's so prevalent, then and now.

Grace for me and no one else.

It's like getting free tickets to a Padres game from a friend. At the game, you bump into another friend who got free tickets to the game from the same guy but they were ten rows better than yours. So you spend the rest of the game mentally stewing over how you were slighted. Totally missing the pleasure of the game.

"We become like the older brother if we go to church and pursue virtue but lack compassion and love for others. We show that we do not understand grace if we become angry when God does not reward us in the way we expect. God does not owe us anything, but he graciously gives us all things we need in Christ Jesus." TS

The older brother wants "stuff," the blessing, the wealth, the honor, the independence; as much as the younger brother does but he trusts in his own performance for it (idolatry) and misses the relationship with the father. Who he is always with, all that is his is the sons, yet he won't celebrate when the "dead comes alive." When the lost are found.

Ultimately the parable is about the older brother because Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees and scribes (see 15:1-3). Jesus wanted these self-righteous leaders who had no compassion on the lost to see themselves in that brother.

The story hangs there. Jesus doesn't say more. The point likely to woo the scribes and the Pharisees out of grumbling into celebration that wayward have come home. Into the community of the kingdom. Maybe even repentance for their idolatry and despising the father and his ways.

"The parable ends, then, with this question: Will the older brother come to the party? Will the Pharisees and scribes share the same joy of God and angels over

the return of tax collectors and sinners? The invitation is open. Jesus invites them to celebrate and enjoy God's forgiveness as well—the choice is up to them.” TS

If we stay in the story though, we can see what makes the difference is not ultimately the repentance of the immoral son, or even the realization of the moral son. It's the love of the father that defines the family.

The Love of the Father

This Father is different.

Reckless in giving into the request for the child's share.

Reckless running out to the son...Older men did not typically run since it was considered undignified.

Reckless extravagance to celebrate a rescue.

Reckless entreating of the older brother.

All out of love. What was meant to be enough for them; what when seen rightly would keep them from idolatry both immoral and moral. What creates the community that feasts and dances together.

A mere picture of the extravagant love of the Father for us!

Micah 7:18 “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love.” (ESV)

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (ESV)

Romans 5:8 “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (ESV)

1 John 4:9–10 “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. [10] In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (ESV)

God's love is realized in our rescue in Jesus. That we were the immature one, rejecting him and running after foolishness, yet he welcomed us home. That we were the mature one expecting to earn a prize and missing that he is our prize, still he remains with us.

This love is for us. And it is also for others! It's supposed to make us giddy when others come alive to it too!

This love is what forms us into family, that we have been these sons, wandering, wayward, present but perturbed, and still his love keeps us.

This love is what keeps us from idolatry, and increasingly helps us recognize that his love is enough.

A love that leads us to repentance. That gives us breath to sing and feet to dance with. That leads us to rejoice with one another in our rescue, "Because we are family."

It's the point of the story.

"For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life—pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures—and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair...

Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not "How am I to find God?" but "How am I to let myself be found by him?" The question is not "How am I to know God?" but "How am I to let myself be known by God?" And, finally, the question is not "How am I to love God?" but "How am I to let myself be loved by God?" God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home." — Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*

The Father's love forms a family. Don't miss it.

Be Loved - Realize it. Jesus wants the Pharisees to see it, he wants us to see it, he gives himself so that we can experience it. Accept it.

“Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion.” – Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging*

Repent - Come home, turn back (not to gain but because he is good).

Live - rejoice with the angels. Love others until they ask why.

This is our family. All prodigals, all loved. It is fitting to celebrate!