

FGBC: Hospitality & Justice: The Father and a couple sons

Luke 15:1-2; 11-34

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We are in a story today that has been mislabeled for centuries. If you've been around church at all and heard someone talk about "The parable of the prodigal son" you know what it's about.

It's that story where a son offensively asks for his inheritance, and then squanders it until he is pig-slop-eating poor. And then finally he humbly returns home to his father who throws a party.

That's how the story goes in the mislabeled version. But that's not the story Jesus told. He actually told a story about a reckless father. And by reckless I mean a father who acts in a way totally different from what any other good religious person would consider normal or wise. And I want to show you that father today, because the father in this story is God, and Jesus is saying everything we naturally think about how we come to God is wrong. This is a flip the world right-side-up story.

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Alright, grab your Bible and open to Luke 15. Jesus actually tells three stories in this chapter to answer a question He gets asked at the beginning.

So in verses 1 and 2 we find Jesus hanging out with a bunch of tax collectors and sinners when some Pharisees do a drive by. Verse 1:

[Read Luke 15:1-2]

I think we read verses like these as no big deal, but this is Jesus on George street happily chatting with a bunch of half-dressed prostitutes and some sleezy drug dealers around a box of Timbits – and everyone is having a good time.

That's the scene, and then a bunch of people like us drive by, and as we look out the window and recognize Jesus. And we get nervous because we've invited this guy to guest speak at our church. And so we look at each other and wonder "What are we getting into? This guy welcomes sinners and eats with them?"

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The word "welcomes" here means "eagerly awaiting" or "looking forward" to. In other words Jesus didn't get jumped by this crowd and asked for change. He went looking for them because He likes them – that's weird. And the Pharisees ask each other "what's up with this guy?"

And Jesus tells three stories to answer them. First there is this shepherd who has 100 sheep, and one gets lost. And so he goes on the hunt and finds it. And when he locates it he calls his friends and throws a party – not to eat mutton, but to celebrate this sheep that he loves.

And then there is this poor lady who has 10 coins – probably an inheritance – and she loses one. So she turns her house upside down until finally she finds it. And she is so happy that she calls her neighbours and friends and throws a party.

And in case anyone is wondering what these stories mean Jesus just tells us. So in verse 7 and 10 He says “The story means God is happy when sinners get saved – that’s why I like sinners. That’s the point!

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And then we get a third story which is way more in depth but contains similarities. There is a father, a couple sons and a party.

Now you might think this is simple except for hundreds of years this has been called the “The prodigal son” story. But there are two sons, not one. And the main character isn’t either of them but the father. And Jesus tells this story to redefine God, redefine sin and to redefine what it means to be saved. And all of this affects us and the kind of hospitality and justice we are invited to enact.

So let me take you into scene 1 which starts in verse 11:

[Read Luke 15:11-12]

There is a father and two sons. And so far we know that one of them is a disrespectful idiot.¹

So in first century Middle Eastern culture if you had two sons and you died then your estate would be divided between your sons. The older always got a double portion, so that would be two thirds here, and the younger would get one.

The problem in this story is that the father isn’t dead, but the younger son wishes he was. He says, “I’m tired of this family. I don’t want a relationship with you, I just want your stuff. Any chance we can work this out?”

Now imagine how that would go over with your dad? This is the first shocking part of this story. But immediately on its tail comes a second. And that is that the father does what the son asks – he divides his property.

Now the word “property” here is the word “*bion*” which is strange. It’s actually the root of our word biology. So the father divides more than some land, he divides himself up, everything he is and has worked for. He tears himself apart giving his disrespectful son what he asks. Why would he do this?

¹ Outline adapted from Tim Keller “The Prodigal Sons” <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-prodigal-sons-5424/> (Accessed April 5, 2019)

Well the father is God in this story. That's not the punch line, that's the point from the very beginning so no need for a spoiler alert. Jesus wants to change how we think about God. So this father endures the worst thing a person can endure, rejected love.

Now nobody Jesus was telling this story to had ever seen a father act like this. In the first century if a son said this to his dad the father would be expected to kick him out and disown him.

This was a patriarchal society. Fathers were valuable, kids not so much. And this father was just spurned by his son and so to minimize the shame and pain of having a son like this he would send him packing. And that makes sense. I mean what do you do to minimize the pain when someone rejects your love? Have you loved someone and been rejected?

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I've told this story before, but it's so painful it's worth telling again. It was grade 11 and I called this cute girl up on the phone. I'd been thinking about her for months. And finally I worked the courage up to give her a call. I had everything scripted. Even back then I was a manuscript preacher. And so we got chatting on the phone. I made it through point 1, point 2 and point 3 which was supposed to make me sound casual. And then boom! I asked her out – and in my script this was a good plan. The problem was my script didn't have any of her lines in it. And she burst out laughing and said "Are you joking?"

Now I was off script and should have started digging up, but all that came out was "no, I'm not joking." And then I spent the rest of the year telling myself how lucky I was that I hadn't gotten tangled up with her kind anyway.

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Now don't feel bad for me, my story ends well. I got someone way better. But the point is, isn't this what we do? When you get rejected don't you do anything you can to diminish your affection so that your rejected love doesn't hurt so bad. That's normal. But that's not what this father does. He bears it. He lets it hurt. He tears himself apart because he doesn't want his affection for his son to diminish.

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Enter scene 2. Look at verse 13.

[Read Luke 15:13-24]

The son wanted freedom from his father's tame and boring house – it was all restriction for him. And so he set off to enjoy wild living. The word "wild" means care-free or "reckless." But tell me if this sounds familiar; doesn't running away from God always start out feeling free, but end bad?

I'm thinking of the guy who gives himself to a string of sexual relationships – does he end up with true love and happy? Or what about the girl who goes shopping and buys everything she wants. Does she end up as rich as she makes herself out to be or just in debt? Similarly, the high-life living son in this story ends up slopping pigs.

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Hear this, when you cut your ties with God you aren't free, you just tie yourself to a different master. The only difference is now you are a slave not a son or daughter.

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But it's here at the bottom that the story takes a turn and the son makes a plan. "I'll go to my father and tell him I've been stupid. I've sinned." But then he makes a mistake.

He says I'll tell my father, "I know I don't deserve to be a son, but make me one of your hired servants." What he's asking is for the opportunity to work his debt off. That's his plan. And so he sets off, but his father sees him coming. The father's been eagerly awaiting him. He's been looking forward to welcoming him home. And so he runs and embraces him.

And here is the third shocker in this story. A Jewish man hearing this for the first time would be laughing at this point. And that's because for a middle eastern man to run he has to tuck his toga up between his legs and hold it with one hand. And then you've got this huge diaper like thing all tucked up there and you'd kind of run-waddle down the street. You might do this if you were escaping from a house fire, but other than that no self-respecting business man ever ran. Kids ran, women ran, men didn't run. This would be a sure way to look like an idiot.

But this reckless father doesn't care. It's compassion that provokes him to abandon his pride and sanity and run to the son who scorned him.

And the son starts his speech – "forgive me, I've sinned..." But the father won't let him go beyond that. He's not going to wait for the son to get cleaned up. He's not going to give him a chance to earn his way back. The father says "go get the best robe – that's his robe. And my ring, and my sandals. And go get that fat cow, we are going to party. I've got a son back." God throws a party when sinners come home. Have you given God an opportunity to party?

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The story's not over. There's another son. So look at verse 25.

[Read Luke 15:25-32]

This son is angry, and most of us can understand why. He's been the good son. He stayed home and was responsible. He worked hard and obeyed the rules. And now stuff is happening that isn't fair. Does this make sense? He deserves the party. But this useless son of his father is getting one instead!

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And so he publicly humiliates his father by refusing to go in to the greatest feast his father has ever thrown. And then he chastises him, "how dare you waste our money on this son of yours – he's not my brother." And what he really cares about is how much money is being blown. The fattened calf would have been recklessly extravagant.

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We get it. But you can probably feel that something is wrong. And Jesus' point is that the father has a second shameful son. A second son deserves to be thrown out for shaming his dad – the greatest sin you could commit in the Middle East. But a second time the father is gracious. He goes out and encourages him to come in.

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But we never find out what happens. The story just ends.

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So what's going on? Three things. Jesus is redefining God, He is redefining sin, and He is redefining salvation.

So first Jesus redefines God. The church talks about God as Father all the time, but in the first century this was new. The Jews didn't speak about God as Father. God was loving, but not personal to them. This is an idea Jesus starts. And the picture of Father He gives is an incredible one.

What this means is if you've had a bad dad you don't need to panic. This isn't patriarchal propaganda, the Father here isn't like your dad. But this is true even if you've had a great dad. Jesus is presenting a picture of no Father anyone has ever imagined.

This father isn't harsh or mean, this one is generous and emotional and forgiving. This father is powerful and compassionate. And this father has a high standard for what constitutes relationship, but then sacrifices himself to make sure his sons are able to live in it. Friends, God doesn't care about the rules or how bad you've messed up. He wants you. And Jesus wants you to see that.

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The second thing He does is redefine sin. When we think about sin most of the time we think of bad actions. So if you steal the candy bar or look at porn then you sinned. And this definition remains unchallenged with the first son. He takes the fathers money, squanders it on prostitutes and parties, and everyone knows he's a sinner.

But then Jesus gives us the second son, and a second life of sin. But the older brother would fit in incredibly well in our church. We would want him leading worship, we would let him serve communion and preach. But everything he does in the story is sin – everything. Even his obedience.

You see both sons are alienated from the father. Both sons want his stuff not him. Now one son goes about accomplishing what he wants by being bad, while the other son goes about accomplishing what he wants by being good. In verse 29 the older son tells his father "I've always worked hard for you, I've always obeyed everything you said" – I've been good, so I deserve your stuff. And so both sons are sinners who need to repent and be forgiven before relationship can be restored.

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Now we started today in verses 1 and 2, so look back there. Jesus is talking to two groups of people. The first is a bunch of tax collectors and sinners, the second is a bunch of Pharisees. These are the two brothers and the two kinds of people who attempt to find happiness in life.

One kind seeks happiness and life through living like they want. They are all about self discovery and pushing the envelope and some of us are like this. A second kind seeks happiness through religion and obeying the rules and some of us are like this. We are all seeking happiness, but Jesus says both sides are wrong. Both sides are sinners.

And both are sinners because both kinds of people are trying to get happiness from God instead of finding it in Him. Both are seeking to be their own saviour.

Friends, the older brother needs to be saved. Now hear this, there are a few people in this room who tend towards younger brother lives – running from God into foolish living has a draw for you. But most of us here lean towards the older brother. And what Jesus is saying is that there are people in this room, probably lots, who aren't saved in spite of going to church all the time and praying every day and reading your Bible. And Jesus says make sure this isn't you!

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So how do you know if you're a church-attending older brother who needs to be saved? You know if when unfair stuff happens – either good things happen to people who don't deserve them, or bad stuff happens to you – you get angry and resentful at God.

The older brother worked hard for the father. He says "I deserve a party with at least a goat, and I haven't got one while he gets that!? I've tried my best and my life isn't going right. I've been good but You aren't being fair to me. You owe me more." This is the trap that exposes unsaved religious people.

And here Jesus says it isn't the good who get rewarded while the bad are punished. It is the humble who get saved while the proud miss out. And both sons start out proud. Jesus has redefined sin.

So ask yourself "Do I need God's mercy, or does He owe me something good?"

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The third thing Jesus does is redefine salvation. Friends, salvation isn't going to heaven when you die. Salvation isn't pleasures forever more or enjoying the freedom of forgiveness or joy. These are God's things. Salvation is getting God. Salvation is relationship with Father.

That's what the father wants in this story. And that's what the two sons reject in favor of getting his stuff.

So it isn't how you live, it is why. If you love God you are going to want to obey Him. But the older brother obeyed too. But he obeyed to get God's stuff, not because he loved the father.

So how do you get saved? Well first God has to initiate. And the father goes out to both his sons. He offers restored relationship to the younger son and the older. Now get your head around this – Jesus knew the Pharisees were going to kill Him and yet He goes out to them. So He has gone out to you too regardless of whether you are the younger or the older son. Jesus offers you His love and forgiveness.

But we need to repent. And we need to not just repent from doing bad things like the younger brother, but from doing good things like the older brother. People like us need to repent from the reasons we have done the right things; we need to repent from self-justification. Until we do we will never be able to offer hospitality and justice to those we deem unworthy of it.

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And finally we need to see how much it cost God to bring us home. Friend, this is why we love the Father. You see in this story the older son bears the cost of the party. He is entitled to everything his father has. But he isn't gracious. He doesn't love his father and so he doesn't look like his father. And so he isn't able to offer his father's hospitality to his brother.

But in our story Jesus became the older brother we need. He lived the perfect life and took the cost of our mistakes upon Himself. On the cross Jesus was stripped so we could be clothed. This is how much God loves you.

And He wants two things from you in return. First, He wants you to see how much He loves you and to fall in love with Him in response. And second, He wants you to extend the radical, reckless hospitality He extended to you to the people He has put in your life who don't deserve it. Jesus wants you to see Him and be transformed to look like Him.