

Parable of the Dysfunctional Family—Luke 15: 11b-32

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An adaptation of a sermon by

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If you've ever complained about your dysfunctional family, let me tell you you've got nothing on the bible. Scripture is full of them—Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brother and of course the prodigal and his family. That's why the parable of the prodigal son is so easy to relate to, it's so easy to make it our own.

The cost of making it our own though is that by removing it from its original setting or context we can lose its intended meaning. In our individualistic society this parable is about our personal relationships with God; when we decide to go home and say we're sorry, we too can be sure that a banquet awaits us—an improbable feast given in our honour by a father whose grace lavishly exceeds all human reason. That's a perfectly good story, but I'm not sure it's the story Luke intended to tell.

You see, chances are nine out of ten of Jesus' listeners are subsistence farmers, like the family in the parable. Their land is their livelihood. They receive it in trust from their ancestors and they hold it in trust for their children. Additionally, a great deal depended on being and having good neighbours. When you need help getting your crops in before the rain comes, or raising a barn—or having a baby, or digging a grave—you count on the neighbours, the same way they count on you. You invite them to your parties, and they invite you to theirs.

In this world, the most important thing is the family to which you belong. If you grew up or have lived in a small town you know something about this. Family names in small towns come loaded with all sorts of background information. We might understand that a bit, but there are other things about Jesus' Middle Eastern world for which we have no reference—such as the huge honour owed the patriarch of a clan, and the elaborate code for keeping that honour in place. Patriarchs did not run. Patriarchs did not leave their places at the heads of their tables when guests were present. Patriarchs did not plead with their children; they told their children what to do. Patriarchs absolutely never gave their inheritance before death.

When the younger son asks for his share of the family property, he deals his father a double blow. He not only means to break up the estate; he also means to leave his father, who counts on both of his sons to care for him in his old age. His father responds to the double blow with a double turning of the cheek. He not only divides his property between his sons, though he is still very much alive; he also allows his younger son to sell his share, so that the boy can liquidate his assets and take them with him when he goes. The "for sale" sign is not up very long, apparently, but long enough for everyone in town to see it. What kind of patriarch cannot prevent his son from carving up the family farm?

¹ *Parable of the Dysfunctional Family*, 17-Apr-2006, www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/031807.html

The younger son of course loses everything, reduced to craving the food given pigs. He loses it to Gentiles—Roman citizens, pagan pig-owners, complete strangers to the God of Israel. He might as well have used his birth certificate to light a Cuban cigar. The prodigal's only hope is to be hired on by his father. He has his confession ready. He isn't returning home out of love, and he won't pretend he is. He is returning home out of hunger.

His father is on the lookout for him and spots him while he is "still far off," and is filled with compassion. Then his father does one of those things that patriarchs do not do. He runs to his son—running is for women and children—he runs and puts his arms around his son, and kisses him right there on the road, where everyone can see them. This reconciliation will cost him his honour—his esteem in others' eyes—but that is a price he is willing to pay. This COVID time has given me a personal experience of costly reconciliation, of grace beyond imagining, of honour cast aside for the sake of love and right relationship. The pandemic has been a time of reflection and re-evaluation of priorities for many. That's been the case for my middle child. Such that Joshua is now Juniper, over the pandemic Andrea and I have lost a son and gained a daughter. Juniper over the pandemic tells us about her struggles with gender dysphoria for years, about the distress she feels at the incongruence between the sex she is assigned at birth, based on her physical traits and her blossoming sense of her gender identity as a female. June is in the process of transitioning from male to female.

But this isn't mostly a story about June, it's a story about her grandparents, my parents. June lives in the basement apartment of her grandparents' house in Toronto. I admit I am apprehensive about their reaction and their relationship with June and the toll this will take on all of them as June begins to live more fully into her gender identity as a young woman. You see, while we might have a hard time relating to the world of the family from our faith story, my parents do not. They were born and raised in rural Portugal. Everything you heard described about the world of Jesus' listeners applies to them. Their families were subsistence farmers, land was everything, land inheritance determined your future, good neighbour relationships were everything. Honour and shame attached to family names is a concept they know well. Losing your families' honour wasn't to be trifled with, shame would cling to a family's name like a bad smell for generations.

My parents now live in west-end Toronto, in the Keele and Eglinton area, more specifically in the Portuguese enclave around Keele and Rogers Road and St. Matthew's Roman Catholic Church. It's amazing how similar the community dynamics are to a small Portuguese village. People aren't subsistence farmers, massive vegetable gardens and backyard chicken coops notwithstanding. But honour and shame still play a prominent role. Honour is earned in the same way it was two thousand years ago. Reciprocity—if someone gives you a loaf of corn bread, you're expected to reciprocate with a homemade chouriça sausage or help tilling a garden. Conduct—you treat people with respect, young people especially toward their elders. Social norms—heavily influenced by Roman Catholicism, you are part of a nuclear family, you are not gay or lesbian and as far as gender goes, it's what your bodily parts tell you you are, end

of story. Small, one-off violations of reciprocity and conduct can be excused but violations of social norms risks bringing shame on the family, whispers and shunning by the community. It's in the context of this loaded background that my heart tightens somewhat when June starts wearing dangly earrings, make up and skirts back in the fall. I brace myself; I never consider that my parents might kick June out, but I do think it is a possibility that they grow distant and cold towards her. I don't look forward to the pressure they will try to exert on me to dissuade June from expressing who she is. One day, I'm on the phone with my mother and she tells me, as if it's nothing to her, that she is sitting on the front veranda the other day and she notices June wearing a beautiful skirt and tells her as much. Later, in speaking with June she confirms that grandma is complimenting her on her jewelry and clothing. Despite these hopeful signs I still have a difficult time imagining myself talking to them about what June is going through. It seems to me beyond the possibility of what they are capable of embracing.

One day, while visiting, sitting at their kitchen table, my mother with my father present asks if June is becoming a woman. With clammy hands and uncertain voice, I say, "yes." She responds, "you know it doesn't matter to your dad and I, we love her the same, Josh/June it doesn't matter to us. She's the same person." My dad, sitting there, nods his agreement. Immediately I feel lighter, what amazing grace beyond anything I can imagine. As a couple of tears trickle out of the corner of my eyes, I whisper an inadequate "thank you." Later, I say how important it would be for June to hear these same words from them directly. They have that conversation. What a gift, what grace for June to know the unconditional love of her grandparents at such a tender, vulnerable time. Now when I hear my mom tell me how June painted her nails or my dad recount how pleased he is that June cuts his hair my soul is fed by this lavish banquet of unexpected, undeserved, unimagined love and grace.

So it is with the father and his younger son. He turns to his workers and tells them to bring his son the best robe in the house (which would be his own robe), to put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Next, he orders his servants to kill the fatted calf—the celebration won't be a quiet family affair but a feast of roast veal for the entire village. It is a banquet of reconciliation for anyone who will come (the eldest son refuses, but that's for another Sunday).

And just like that, the prodigal is saved. He is saved by being restored to relationship with his father, his family, his clan, his village—by the father's willingness to be a really poor patriarch. The reconciliation of his community means more to him than his own honour. The restoration of relationship means more to him than being thought great, right, or even a good father. It's more a reunion story than a repentance story. It's about the high cost of reconciliation, in which individual worth, identity and rightness all go down the tubes for the sake of ending divisions, reconciling relationship, and living in peace. Yet the father says nothing about the price. Love trumps all: honour, reputation and social expectations be damned.

My parents were that father, as the late Henri Nouwen said, we're all called to be that father.² May God bless us with a hunger, a yearning for right relationship that transcends all fear, all ego, all other hungers for social acceptance, that we may know the joy of life seated at God's lavish banquet of love. Amen.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

² Nouwen, <https://jameslau88.com/2020/05/20/the-father-of-the-prodigal-son-by-henri-nouwen/>. Originally in Nouwen's Book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*,