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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Sometimes, the Bible may seem to be idealistic. And yes, it talks about ideals. But it does not allow us to be confused about humanity. We people are hard to live with. Our relationships are difficult to negotiate with faithfulness and integrity. Sure, the societies in biblical times were a bit different. But we get caught up with similar kinds of issues. We have problems with the same important relationships. We wrestle with what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus amid them all.

Jesus' parable is one of the most well-known parables in our society. It is clear that there is a "hero" to this story. The father of the family reflects God's love for us, and the love that we are to share with others. Unlike other Bible passages, this one is remarkably realistic! The people are not perfect. The father suffers trials with relating to his two sons. Insults are flying – sons are staking out their territory. Through all the chaos, Jesus paints a path of grace and faithfulness for us all.

The Father's first insult was delivered by his younger son. By asking for his inheritance, the essentially said, "I wish you were dead" to his father. As if that weren't enough, his action had real, concrete consequences for his family. The younger son broke up the family's estate. He would have received property, like

land – which he promptly sold to go off and “find himself.” The culture at that time presumed that sons would be close to home and remain invested in those relationships. Meals on Wheels programs had not started yet. There were no assisted living facilities. When parents aged, they relied upon their sons to take care of them.

This was especially true if the matriarch outlived the patriarch. We don’t hear anything about the mother of this parable family. She may be dead already, or she just may not have been mentioned. Even if she were still living, her husband’s property would go to his sons. She would have nothing – no belongings, no land, no food, no resources. It was important for all sons to stay close in order to continue to care for their parents.

Despite all of these things, the generous father gave his property to his sons. He did not try to prevent his younger son from leaving. Perhaps he knew that the rebellion would have been stronger, or more damaging, if the father got in the way. He watched as his younger son sold what was his and irresponsibly left town. The whole village would have watched, too. Can you imagine what the rumor mill would have said? They were probably astounded by the turn of events – and ashamed on their friend’s behalf.

The second instance of insult and humiliation was one that the father chose. After the younger son found he could not make it in his independent life, he returned home. His hunger motivated that planned-for apology. He was probably sweating bullets, for his father would have control. The father held the power – the power to not receive him as a guest, the power to refuse his request, the power to make his son feel even more awful that he felt already. Dad could have punished him for breaking his family relationships, for undercutting their finances, for changing their family’s relationship with everyone around them. Chances are that the neighbors would have snubbed his boy already, by the time he arrived at the homestead.

But the father chose to act very differently. The younger son hadn’t even made it to the driveway – let alone the front door. And his father came running – running! – to him. Aristotle said, “Great men never run in public.” His role as patriarch would have been to wait and at least be proper and dignified. His family had already been the focus of rumors and the butt of jokes.

Instead, when he heard that his son was coming, he ran! He gathered up his robes and took off. Like a young boy who can’t wait for a visitor. Like a woman sprinting in a full length dress. The father ran to him to start the welcome – before his neighbors could spoil it with their protective rudeness. He sent his servants to

fetch the best robe – which would have been his own. Find a ring and sandals, for this is a member of the household. Kill the fatted calf and make a feast! He set a banquet to restore his lost son to the family. Even though his son had made many, many bad choices. He wished his father dead – he left behind his responsibilities – he sold his part of the estate. He “squandered his property in dissolute living.” He was a bad Jew, spending too much time with Gentiles who raised pigs for slaughter. (No good Jew would do that.) He had selfishly rejected all of his most important relationships – with God, and parents, and neighbors.

Who knows, maybe there was a heart-to-heart the next day. The most important thing for this dad was the return of his son. The dead was alive again, the lost had been found! His son’s restoration to their family was far more important than anything else.

The third insult against this father comes from the older son. He is remarkably similar to his younger brother, even though they made very different choices. He, too, dishonors his family relationships when he refuses to enter the party. He, too, shames the family by making it a house divided. He, too, selfishly disregards others because he is focused on himself.

Just as with the younger son, the father goes out to him. Says, Please come and celebrate with us! The older son rails against the injustice of it all. It's not fair! Why does he get everything he wants? I'm so good. Why have you never thrown a party for me? Dad tries to explain – and the story ends. We don't know if the eldest son is able to shed his bitterness to embrace his brother and father again.

This father withstood insult and pain from both his children. They continued to be self-centered and stubborn. One was restless and taken with the glitzy life – and the other consumed by his self-righteousness and a longing for justice without mercy. In these sons, I can hear myself – can you? Both of them had difficulty entering into the household and joy of their father.

Yet their father continues to stand with them. He gives them the freedom to be themselves and to make mistakes. He protects them from as much harm as he can do – though their destructive choices have consequences that he can't fix. He embraces them with love. Celebrates their return. Invites them to be a part of this household, and this people. Regardless of the ways that they have been blind to their father and their community. No matter how much they have rebelled before. Even when they continue with their faults.

This parable – this is our story. It is we who are stubborn or self-righteous, or who wander away from God’s household. It is we who God seeks to welcome home. And we who God invites to celebrate when others also return.