

ABUNDANT GRACE

Luke 15:11-32

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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It's a story we've heard hundreds of times. I know I have. It's one of the most common stories I hear, and it makes me sad every time. If the walls of my office could talk, they would echo: "My sister and I haven't spoken in ten years." "When my mom died, my wife and I sat on one side of the church, and my siblings sat on the other side with their families." "My best friend just stopped communicating with me; I never found out why." Estrangements between children and parents, friends, siblings, cousins, neighbors, co-workers, and fellow church members...sometimes they are necessary separations, because some relationships are too toxic to be maintained. Sometimes an estrangement is caused by an untreated mental illness or a unilateral decision and the other parties are left helpless. And sometimes, we just dig in our heels and refuse to budge.

What might the story we call the Parable of the Prodigal Son have to say to us? According to a historian who has researched the culture of the Middle East at the time of Jesus, here's what makes the younger son's actions so egregious:

First, he treats his father as if he were already dead. In all of Middle Eastern literature, this is the only instance in which any son asks for his inheritance from a father who is still in good health. It is a slap at a parent and a social scandal.

Second, he severs any relationship with his brother. Land was family property and land conferred status on a family. Two brothers living together on the land after the

father's death would be the preferred resolution because it would retain the whole of the property in the family's name. When the younger son wants his share of the property so he can sell the land and pocket the cash, he forces a division of the land. The division of the property in turn will lessen the family status in the wider community. As we know, once land is sold, it's hard to get back. Maybe the brothers are already alienated, but division of the estate is a radical step.

Third, the younger son's action suddenly exposes the family to criticism in a small, tight-knit community. The boy himself would be treated as a pariah, a social outcast, for he does not respect his father and has no regard for his brother. And to many outside observers it would look as if the father caved in to these demands in a moment of weakness, letting his son ride roughshod over him, reduce his economic status, and offend the other son.

The parable paints a compelling portrait of the younger son as a real bum, for all of these reasons and more. Even so, there's nothing shocking about this story yet. Jesus' original hearers gathered around him, sitting on the ground, on benches, on tree stumps. He's a good storyteller; he has their attention. But this story has a familiar plot so far. Younger sons are stock characters in folk tales of the time - even in the Bible, there are younger sons who follow a stereotype. They sow their wild oats and come home to be the favorites, the heroes. Listening to Jesus, his original audience would be expecting the plot turnaround, just as we all today know the narrative arc of a romantic comedy.

What happens next isn't surprising either. The younger brother falls on hard times. He's out of money. He doesn't even have enough food to eat. He heads home, tail between his legs, composing his so-called apology all the way. He's pretty sure that Dad will take him in, even if it's as a servant instead of a son. Dad won't let him starve.

He's blown all of his inheritance. What he's asking to do is to live in a place that now belongs to his brother, or at least it will, after the father dies.

A couple of the neighbors happen to be outside working when the younger son's figure appears in the distance. They can't believe what they see. The father hikes up his robes and runs at top speed to meet his son. He kisses the boy passionately. He interrupts his son's solemn well-rehearsed speech with excited commands. And by that night, all of the neighbors, the whole community, has been invited to a massive barbecue.

What has happened to this man? Has he completely lost his mind, his dignity? Now maybe it would have been okay for the father to receive the boy back, but not with a party. A stern lecture would have been in order, followed by a disciplinary action.

Jesus' listeners can't believe it either. One commentary on this passage says, "The scene is climactic, if quite bizarre - a manic daddy racing around with symbol after symbol of extravagant restoration, not to mention party plans."

But of course the story isn't over. There is the elder brother. The elder brother who was silent and uninvolved at the start of the parable now returns from a field and nears the house. He hears the news and seethes with anger, with bitterness, saying to

the father, "I have worked for you for years and never disobeyed one of your orders, and you never gave me so much as a goat so I could party with my friends."

The old man's eyes are full with love and understanding. "Dearest child, everything I have is yours."

We don't know what happens next in this family. Will the two brothers sit on opposite sides of the church at Daddy's funeral?

Is there a Mom still around, watching it all unfold from the kitchen window? A mom who has walked on eggshells for years, hoping her two boys would learn to get along with each other?

The story is over, but Jesus' hearers are still sitting where they were, thinking about his words, still shocked at the actions of the father. "No one does that," they say to themselves. "No father would act that way. What is Jesus trying to tell us? What does this story mean?"

Brennan Manning is remembered for a best-selling book in the Christian genre he wrote called The Ragamuffin Gospel - a book about the grace of God. He subtitled it: "Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out." He wrote from personal experience. He struggled with an alcohol addiction throughout his life. His journey included serving in the Korean War, entering the priesthood, leaving the priesthood, marriage, divorce, and several attempts at rehab. He wrote often about the story of the Prodigal Son; one can imagine that he identified. This is some of what he said: "The Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a figure of radical love, radical grace, and radical forgiveness who comes to meet the son and welcome him home. I believe that

Jesus comes to each of us and says, 'I have a word for you. I know your whole life story. I know every skeleton in your closet. I know your every moment of sin, shame, and dishonesty. I know your wavering and your inconsistency. My word is this. I dare you to trust that I love you just as you are.'

The truth doesn't mean that we don't strive to do better. It means that we remember that we already have God's love. It's not something earned or deserved. God already loves us, seeks us and knows us. God's judgment is always tempered by mercy and grace."

The father is so outrageously happy to see his son again that he acts like a fool and he doesn't care who sees it.

Lurking outside is the older son, and we know what he feels like, don't we? We know what resentment smells like, we have tasted bitterness. We have screamed to ourselves, "But that's not fair!"

There's nothing fair about it. Here is where the loving father earns his title. He doesn't take a swing at his firstborn, nor even remind him to honor his father. He knows that, in a way, he has lost both of his sons. He has lost the younger one to a life of recklessness, but he has lost the older one to a life of angry self-righteousness. The older son wants his father to love him as he deserves to be loved, because he has stayed put, he has followed orders, he has done the right thing.

The father loves both sons, not according to what they deserve, but because of who he is. The word "prodigal" means wasteful and imprudent, but it also means lavish, generous, and extravagant. In this good sense of the word, the father is prodigal. He

pours out his love on both sons. He never seems to tire of giving it away. He has plenty of love to go around. They are a family; they belong to one another, and a party for one is a party for all.

I imagine we can find ourselves relating to different characters in this story at different times of our lives. Sometimes we do something so stupid, we make such a mess of things, that redemption seems impossible. Sometimes we're like the parent, so worried about something, or someone we love that we stand at the end of the driveway every night, looking both ways down the road, hoping for a glimpse of good news. Many times we're consumed with a sense of the unfairness of life as we grumpily compare our lot to others.

Where does grace need to pour lavishly into your life right now? Are you holding onto an old resentment so tightly that you don't know if you can let it go? Do you need to forgive yourself for mistakes in your past, things said in haste or anger, or kind words withheld? Do you need to learn to accept the things that are in a spirit of surrender?

This is the story of a family. We tell it year after year because it still rings true. Because relationships are hard work. One hurt quickly turns into a scar that we may refuse to let heal. Believing that God's forgiveness is already freely offered to us is an easy first step to take.

Let us pray.

God of prodigal love and grace, give us the wisdom to cultivate more forgiveness and let go of all of the resentment to which we've been clinging. You are the home where we feel safe and accepted, and for that, we are abundantly grateful. Amen.

