

“Back in the Saddle”
C Lent Four; Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32
March 31, 2019; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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The Story of the Lost Sheep

15¹⁻³ By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, “He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.” Their grumbling triggered this story.

The Story of the Lost Son

11-12 Then he said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’

12-16 “So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He

was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

17-20 “That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’ He got right up and went home to his father.

20-21 “When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’

22-24 “But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

25-27 “All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day’s work was done he came in. As he

approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, 'Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.'

²⁸⁻³⁰ "The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son said, 'Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!'

³¹⁻³² "His father said, 'Son, you don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!'"

I. IN THE MIDST OF THE FAMILY

A man, a son, another son, some servants, some pigs. Some wealth in the form of an inheritance – we don't know how much. Some conflict when one son wants to divvy up the goods while the old man is still alive. Much consternation around that divvying, leaving, staying, and coming back. Frustration all wrapped up with worry, concern, anger at betrayal, jealousy, sibling

rivalry, lostness, foundness, forgiveness, a fatted calf and a feast.

Sounds like a pretty typical family, don't you think? Over the years as a pastor and a hospice chaplain, I have learned of more families than I can count, whose family dynamics and relationship systems sound pretty much like our dear Prodigal Son's family. It might not be about inheritance and leaving and returning, specifically, but all these painful and joyful dynamics are all there. In *all* of our family systems. We might call this a "dysfunctional family," but come on! We're all pretty dysfunctional when you get right down to it. (Remember: Normal is just a setting on the dryer!)

So, let's get into this story right where it's at—a stew of relationships, feelings and frustrations. The younger son has gotten "over it," run off, squandered the family's resources, come to his senses and returned. He comes up the road with a confession ready to stammer out, but Dad is so freakin' relieved to see him alive and coming home, that he doesn't let him wallow too much in his apology.

Does the Father really cut him off, interrupt him mid-sentence, or does he *hear* his confession but moves quickly to the Assurance of Pardon? What he's confessed is good enough. It's not time for a big long laundry list of faults and wrongdoings. Now is the time to party. Let's have a celebration tonight. We'll get into all that other stuff tomorrow.

“We *do* need to talk. To hear each other’s hearts. To seek understanding and insight from what has transpired. To hear all sides of the story. For, you, my son, have done some things you regret and said things when you left in anger that can’t be unsaid. But, we too, have our part in this story. We said and did things that made you want to leave home. Oh, how many nights I have laid awake replaying what it must have been that made you so unhappy here. So eager to leave your home and hearth.”

“We need to talk, yes, and recalibrate our relationship. But that’s for tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Tonight we dance! And feast and revel in the love of family. I’ll tell your brother that too—he’s a little put out at the moment!”

Today is for a warm and loving embrace, and a celebration of Return. Probably a *bath* to go with that royal robe too!

No question, relationships are messy. Families are messy. Family dynamics are among some of the hardest to work through. And, to *keep* working through. But work through, we must.

Much has been disputed and debated about whether he was contrite; truly sorry, ready to repent and fully aware of the error of his ways. And, much is made of whether the father makes him apologize or just welcomes him back, no questions asked and acts as if nothing has happened—clean slate.

This all does not matter all that much. For this younger son *wanted* to come back. To come around into the family, pull up a chair at the Family Table. Live, love and labor among his clan. Work through their difficulties—in the past, present and what would surely come in the future. For that is what life in community is about.

II. COLLEGE KID

Any of you ever had a college kid come home after being away –either for a holiday or the start of summer? Any of you ever *been* that college kid who’s gone off, impatient to get out from under your parent’s thumb? Probably a little disdainful, and just sure you’ll run your life and house better than they do? And when you come back, you’re a little full of yourself and don’t want to be the kid living under their roof again—you’re big, and mature and important now—all grown up!

And, it’s a little awkward. For you can’t just waltz in and be a lazy, honored guest who doesn’t lift a finger. You’re still part of the family and part of the work crew. We always reminded Rocky as soon as he came home: There will be your favorite chicken dinner tonight and a warm homecoming with love and laughter. But, tomorrow, there will be mucking the corral! Oh, and, don’t forget to make your bed, clean up your room, keep the bathroom tidy for guests while you’re here, etc.

III. WHEN HE CAME TO HIMSELF

What happened down there? In that pigsty? When

things didn't go as planned. When friends turned out to be hangers on – their true colors shining through when the money was gone.

He came to himself.

There's that "Identity Test" again. All through Lent we've been asking the question with Jesus, "Who am I? Whose am I? Who am I called to be? What am I called to do with this one, precious life I've been given?"

He came to himself. Down there in the pigsty. He suddenly knew who he was—again. Part of the family. Child of a loving father (and presumably mother—she doesn't get much mention here in the story. Okay, none at all!)

He "came to himself." Not because of who he was and what he'd done, but because of who God is. Who his loving family was. He had to know that he would not be turned away or beaten if he came back. Not every son or daughter who leaves home knows deep down that –repentant or not—they will be welcomed back.

I have a friend who came out as gay when she was at college. The next time she came home for a holiday, she found all her worldly belongings on the porch! Her mother had responded quite differently than the father in our story!

God is love divine, all love's excelling. We human mothers and fathers are not always so good.

Did he repent? Was he sorry? We don't know. Did he still have bones to pick with the other brother, perhaps? Maybe big brother was a bully. Yes, he was faithful and hardworking for the father, but maybe, when Dad wasn't looking, he picked on the little brother—maybe he made him want to leave! So much here we don't really know. So many sides to this story, and different perspectives. It's not black and white; one person right and one person wrong. Life never is. Relationships are *never* that simple.

All we know is he wanted to be back. Back in the saddle; back among his kin. Working it out, working together, wading through the muck and mire of life, love and community.

IV. WHY DID JESUS TELL THIS STORY?

Why did Jesus tell this story? A telling line in the first three verses give us a hint:

"He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends."

Aha! Jesus was getting dinged for sitting down to table with "the wrong crowd." Taxpayers and sinners, oh my! He was always getting into trouble for who he dined with – on all sides!

Pavlovitz points out:

"I imagine the street people often criticized him for breaking bread with the Pharisees *too*, accusing him of conspiring with their oppressors or contributing to their marginalization!" (A Bigger Table, p. 59)

Crossan says this parable is a *response* to that grief Jesus was getting. He challenges their “us and them” name-calling, and makes it about “lost and found.” For we all get lost—a sheep and a coin in the stories right before—and now a son of all things! And the proper response to the lost being found is communal rejoicing! Party on! Jesus is saying just that—don’t be grumbling when the lost are found, even if you’re not sure they’re repentant or have changed their tune. Don’t be judging the tax collectors and sinners and *anyone* I’m dining with, for that matter!

Crossan reminds us that Jesus urges celebration! And *that* is the point of all these stories and a “so there!” to the judgmental critics as well! “This is what I’m doing,” says Jesus. “I am finding/saving the lost ones—“tax collectors and sinners” –and, once found/saved, *nobody* should grumble, but rather all should *rejoice!*” (*The Power of the Parable*, p. 38, John Dominic Crossan)

V. WHO ARE THE SINNERS?

Who is the sinner in *this* story? Who are the sinners Jesus is hanging out with, sitting around the table with? All of the above! Every character in this story has their shortcomings. Every person around the family table is a sinner – for every one is a messy human being. Every place around every table is set for a child of God to sit down, pull up the chair, and join the circle—no matter who, no matter what they’ve done yesterday and what they might do or not do tomorrow; no matter where on life’s journey.

I think Jesus knew that we were each one of those characters—at some point. And it might depend on the day and the relationship, which one we exhibit more of.

The younger son’s foibles and squanderous living are well known, but the Older Brother has gotten a pretty bad rap down the years, too. Is he lacking in grace? Geesh! Can’t let that years-long sibling rivalry die, especially on this one, wonderful night?! Can’t get rid of the chip on his shoulder?

The Father—he appears all loving and embracing and forgiving, but he is not immune from criticism either. We might call him an “enabler” in our day! Not showing enough tough love to that recalcitrant kid!

Not very good parenting, there. You let them run off with the money and squander what you’ve worked so hard all your life to save up, with nary a thank you as he’s busting out the door. Caused you a lot of sleepless nights, consumed with worry, and then you softy! You let him waltz back in here –not even sure he’s sorry for what he’s done. No consequences?! You just flunked “Parenting with Love & Logic!”

VI. WHEN HE CAME TO HIMSELF....

We are all messy human beings in messy relationships – sinners if you will—invited around the Table. And we all “come to ourselves” at some point and realize that we need a place of belonging and a place setting of grace.

“When he came to himself.....

--The son named Prodigal realized he wasn't where he belonged.

--He knew that he was made in the image of God and no matter what he'd done, it didn't have to define him for the rest of his life. And he certainly didn't need to starve forever.

--He knew that admitting he was wrong, turning around and heading down a new path would have its challenges, but there's no time like the present to begin.

When he came to himself.....

--The son named Had Enough Elder Brother knew that he couldn't just wallow in his self-righteousness forever. Yes, he was the favored oldest child. Yes, he was the one set to inherit the lion's share of the family wealth. Yes, he was the responsible one—he should be! Since he was keeping the family farm going for himself as much as anyone.

When he came to himself....

Elder Brother might have realized that you can't be mad and estranged forever. It eats you up inside and someday Dad would be gone and maybe this little pipsqueak brother would be all he had left in the world.

When he came to himself....

The Father knew that he was just so, so glad to have the Prodigal back, that maybe he wasn't such a bad parent after all!

He might not have cared if he was an enabler! Not cared what “people might say.” His son was lost and now he was found. And he'd chosen to come back to them—no matter how hard, and what challenges lay ahead.

When he came to himself, the Father crossed the threshold twice. For he doesn't just run to greet the wayward son. He runs to find the elder son and urge him to join the party, to come to the Table.

“All I have is yours! And yours and yours! This Party, this Table is for Everyone!

When he comes to himself, the father looks a lot like our Divine Father and Mother. For grace does not wait for the apology and the confession of a deserving recipient. Extravagant Grace throws open arms to *both* the sons and all the sons and daughters. The robe is called for, the feast is prepared and *both* the lost and found are celebrated.

Who's the Prodigal? Might be the elder son. Might be the younger son. Might be the father. Who are the sinners that Jesus hangs around with, and welcomes to table fellowship? Every single one of them and every single one of us. And then, I imagine the next time he is challenged by someone saying, “We hear you eat with sinners, Jesus says, “Yes, it's true! I've heard that too! Pull up a chair. Amen.