

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32
November 3, 2013
FBC Vancouver
Darrell W. Johnson

More Scandalous Love

(Series: "Parables of Jesus: Posing The Scandal of His Good News")

We have today the great privilege we had last Sunday, of listening to Jesus of Nazareth as He tells what many people throughout history consider to be the greatest story ever told. It is recorded for us in the fifteenth chapter of the gospel according to Luke the Physician. As I noted last Sunday, Luke 15 has been called "the gospel within the Gospel." And rightly so! For in Luke 15 we have the good news of Jesus Christ in its "purest form," so to speak. Especially in the parable usually called "the parable of the Prodigal Son." We will discover that this should be called "the parable of the Prodigal Sons." And, we will discover that it might be more accurately called "the parable of the Prodigal Father."

The parable, the story, has redemptive power in any cultural setting. But the story really comes alive and does its redemptive work in us when it is heard in the original context in which Jesus first told it, when it is heard in its Middle-Eastern cultural context.

As I said last Sunday, whenever we read and reflect on Jesus' parables in Luke 15 we need to remember two truths. First, Jesus taught the stories in response to accusations made against Him by scribes and Pharisees. Together, scribes and Pharisees were the self-appointed guardians of the reputation of Israel's Law and Israel's God. They were zealous to protect the name of the Holy God. A most worthy ambition! As far as they were concerned, Jesus of Nazareth was bringing shame on that Name, and thereby putting Israel at risk of losing God's blessing.

You see, sinners and tax-collectors were flocking to Jesus. They could see that there was something different about this rabbi. They wanted to be near Him. And scandal of scandals, Jesus wanted to be near them! "Be near" is putting it mildly! Jesus "received" them. The word means "welcome as brothers and sisters." Jesus was making sinners and tax-collectors members of His own family. Ghastly!

And Jesus was eating with them! Double ghastly! In the Middle-Eastern culture to eat a meal with another person is a sacramental act, an act signifying total, unreserved acceptance. Jesus was accepting sinners and tax-collectors just as they were without reservation!

And the Scribes and the Pharisees were horrified. They leveled the accusation: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." It is said out of disgust and anger. In their minds such behaviour was shameful. It was bringing shame on Israel's Law. And it was bringing shame on Israel's God. "Shame on you, Jesus of Nazareth!" Jesus responds to the accusation by telling the parables recorded in Luke 15.

The second fact to keep in mind whenever we read Jesus' stories is even more important. Through these stories Jesus is painting a picture, a portrait of the Living God. He is painting a picture of the Holy God whose reputation the scribes and the Pharisees were so zealous to protect. Through the interaction of the shepherd with his sheep, the woman with her coin, and the father and his son, Jesus is painting a picture of Who the Holy God is, and what the Holy God is like.

And we can trust this portrait! For the painter is the Only Begotten of the Father. The story-teller is the One Who knows the Father's heart, He has lived in the Father's heart from all eternity and He comes to us from the Father's heart.

Now, as we began to see last Sunday, when Jesus opens up that heart in His stories, especially in the Parable of the Prodigal Sons, He only heightens the scandal, precipitating a crisis that leads to His crucifixion.

Luke 15, verse 11... "And Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons.'" Two sons. This tells us that we will not grasp the message of the story until we enter into the interaction between the father and the older son.

Before we do, let me quickly review the interaction between the father and the younger son. The younger son breaks his father's heart by requesting his share of the family inheritance before his father dies. In that culture, the request is tantamount to wanting his father to die. The father, surprisingly, grants the request! The father gives the younger son a third of the family wealth. The younger son turns his inheritance into cash, and heads off to the far country, where he squanders everything he had – a third of the family wealth. Fortunately for him, a famine hits the far country, and he is in great need. Things become so bad for him that he ends up feeding pigs, and longing to eat what the pigs were eating.

Jesus says the younger son finally "came to his senses" (v. 17). He remembers how good the father is – that the father even generously provides for his hired hands. So the younger son decides to go home. Now, as I tried to show last Sunday, that was a big gamble – a huge risk. For he knows all too well what awaits him:

- The taunting and humiliation by the villagers.
- The hostility and fury of the village elders.
- The scorn of his older brother
- And, he expects, the anger and rejection of his father.

But, since he is desperate... he will endure all that.

He heads home, hoping only to be treated like one of the father's hired servants. He has a speech, with three parts. The third part: "make me like one of your hired servants" (v. 19). That would be grace enough! He realizes that he has sinned against God and his father. He realizes that he has no claim to sonship. He realizes that the father has every right to throw him away – indeed to refuse to see him.

When he arrives at the village gates, he is overwhelmed by a series of incredible surprises. Everything the father does in relationship to the younger son is unexpected. I use the word "everything" carefully – everything the father does in his interaction with the younger son is unexpected.

- The father has been waiting, longing for the son's return.
- When the father sees the son, he runs toward him – a shameful act for a man of his age and status.
- The father embraces the son – even while the son is still in his filthy rags... another shameful act.
- He then kisses the son – even while the son is still dirty and unclean.

Scandalous behaviour! In these acts, the father has taken on the shame of the son! Whatever it was that the villagers, elders, and older son wanted to do to the younger son, they must now do to the father!

The surprises continue. The father will not listen to the younger son's request to be treated as a hired servant (v. 22). Instead, the father orders the servants to:

- put a robe on the son – the best robe, the father's robe.
- put a ring on his finger – the signet ring, the symbol of the father's authority.
- put shoes on his feet – the symbol of sonship.
- and kill the fattened calf – the gesture of hospitality given only to the most honoured of guests.

Let us have a party to celebrate the "homecoming" of the son!

In the first half of the parable, Jesus tells the scribes and Pharisees that the God whose reputation they are zealous to protect is the God Who embraces repentant sinners and throws parties with them! The Holy One risks the divine reputation in order to welcome lost sons and daughters. This is why I have referred to this parable as the "Parable of the Prodigal Father." Everything the father does is culturally unexpected ... and scandalous. Jesus is revealing a waiting, suffering, running, sinner-embracing, sinner-kissing, sinner-dressing, shame-taking-on Father.

Now, let us move to the interaction between the father and the older son. Luke 15:25 – "Now, his older son was in the field." The word "older" is the word *presbuteros*, from which Presbyterians derive their name. As Dale Bruner says, what we discover in the second part of the story is that God even loves Presbyterians!

I think that the older son represents most of us in this room. We have not run off to the far country and squandered everything in loose living. We have sought to be faithful and obedient. We have tried to carry out our duties. The older son is the one who only had to be told once to make his bed or empty the dishwasher. The older son is the one who did not need to be reminded to do his homework or write a thank-you note to his grandmother.

Now what we discover in the second half of Jesus' parable is that although the older son never goes off to the far country, he nevertheless breaks his father's heart. We discover, therefore, that there are two kinds of sinners – law-breakers and law-keepers. Both stand in need of grace.

The older son comes from the field where he has been dutifully carrying out his responsibilities. He hears music and dancing coming from the house. And what is his first response? "Oh, wow! Like totally... something good has happened. My father is happy. I will go and find out why, and celebrate with him!" No. That is not his first response. His first response is suspicion. Something is wrong with this picture... is it not?

He calls one of the boys playing in the street outside the home and asks what is going on. The boy tells him the good news – or what should have been good news to the older son: "Your brother has come home and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound" (15:27).

Jesus says the older brother becomes very angry (v. 28). Angry? Why angry? Because the younger son has shamed the name of the father, and the family, and the village... and he is not being punished! He is not being made to measure up.

You see, for the scribes and Pharisees, repentance – without which no one can be saved – meant conformity to the rules. You can come back into the fold – if and when you measure up to the regulations. The younger son comes home – and is welcomed into the father’s house before he measures up. The younger son does not even promise to measure up!

For Jesus, however, repentance is something else. Repentance means coming to one’s senses. Repentance means realizing my sinfulness and unworthiness. Repentance means coming home and banking on the mercy and grace of God.

The older son is angry because the father himself is upsetting his whole idea of religion and righteousness. What makes him so angry is that the father himself brought further shame on his own name. The music and dancing, the killing of the fattened calf is all the father’s doing ... and for the sake of the prodigal son! All of it is too much for the older son to handle!

So, Jesus says “the older son was not willing to go in” (v. 28), or as another version has it, “the older son refused to go in [the house].” Underline that phrase: not willing to go in. Underline that the older son refused to go in. Why underline it? Because in that refusing to go in, the older son, who is so concerned for the father’s reputation shames his father!

Why does this shame his father? Here again I am indebted to the work of Dr. Kenneth Bailey, who points out that in the middle-east the children are expected to be present when a party is thrown for an honoured guest. We experienced that in the Philippines... when Sharon and I were invited to a home, the key members of the family were expected to be there. I remember being in Seoul, Korea, and after preaching, going to the pastor’s home for dinner, and all four of his sons had to be there – even though two of them didn’t want to be!

The oldest son in particular is expected to “move among the guests, offering compliments, making sure everyone has enough to eat...” (*Poet and Peasant*, 194). In short, the oldest son is to serve as a host. By refusing to come into the house, the older son shames his father in front of the whole village!

Furthermore, the oldest son is expected to serve the honoured guests their meal. That was a symbolic gesture by which the father of the house says, “you are so important to me that my oldest son is your servant.” No wonder the older son does not want to enter the banquet! The father has made the younger son his honoured guest! The older son is expected to come, celebrate with the father, and serve the younger son. Oh dear.

There is more to the cultural background. The older son was expected to embrace the honoured guest and hand out compliments. He refuses... again, shaming the father.

But here is the most shameful act of all. If a son disagreed with his father, he was never to reveal the face publically. Those from Asian or Middle-Eastern cultures know about this, right? The older son should have entered the party, carried out his responsibilities, and then after the guests had gone home, expressed his disagreement. By staying outside, the older son has publically disagreed with his father ... and publically shamed him. Because the father has butchered the fattened calf, all the important people of the village are present. And the older son insults the father in front of them all.

You can see then, that the older son also breaks the father's heart ... perhaps at an even deeper level than the younger son did.

Jesus teaches this parable to reveal the heart of the Holy God. How does the father in the story respond to all this insulting behaviour? Ready? Just as He did in the case of the younger son. Unexpectedly... and scandalously. Everyone expects the father to ignore his older son, or in some way to punish him for his public insolence (*Ibid.*, 196).

But what does the father portrayed by Jesus do? "His father came out" (v. 28). Surprise! His father came out. The older son refuses to go in, so the father goes out. For the second time that day the father goes out of the house, and thereby publically humiliates himself. He goes out not to condemn or punish but to take on the shame of the older son!

In the first half of the story we discover that God the Father takes on the shame of law-breaking sinners. Here, in the second half, we discover that God takes on the shame of law-keeping sinners. The father loves both sons. God's scandalous love is for sinners and tax-collectors... and for scribes and Pharisees. What a picture of the Holy One Jesus is painting!

The father goes out to his older son. He leaves the party ... and goes out to his son. And pleads with his son to see life from the father's perspective – from the perspective of the father's heart. It is what God the Father is asking us to do ... see people from His perspective.

I like how an eleventh century scholar comments on this part of the story:

Look at the heart of this father! It is full of tenderness and love in that he left the banquet, the guests, and his younger son to plead with his elder son to come in. It is as if his own joy is incomplete as long as one of his children is grieving. (Bailey, *Jacob & the Prodigal*, 143)

Now, how does the older son respond to this scandalous love? The younger son was humbled by it ... and let the father love him. What does the older son do? Ready? He further insults his father!

In response to this love, he insults the father even more. We see this in his speech to the father. Remember that the younger son had a speech? So, the older son. Listen carefully. It reveals how far he has inwardly strayed from the father while staying home.

"Look! All these years I've been serving you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" (Luke 15:29-30)

Oh, how those words stabbed the father's heart. Notice how the older son begins: "Look!" There is no title of respect, no honorific. Just, "look!" Goodness. Even when the younger son wanted to break the relationship, he at least had enough respect to say, "father." The elder son does not even say that. As Kenneth Bailey says: "The younger son was a rebel and knew it. His brother is a rebel and does not know it" (*Cross*, 71). Imagine! The father comes out to plead, and the son responds "look!"

There is more to the insult. The older son reveals that the father and the father's friends are not his friends! "You never even gave me a goat to celebrate with my friends." Wait a minute.... your friends? who are those people in the house? The entire village is here. You mean to say they are not your friends? Then who are? The older son has inadvertently revealed that he is not part of the family and circles of the father.

So the Arab scholar Ibrahim Sa'id writes:

"Thus [the older son] is no better than the prodigal son who took his portion and traveled into a far country. The difference between them is that the prodigal son was an 'honorable sinner' in that he was perfectly open to his father. He told his father all that was in his heart. But the older brother was a 'hypocritical sinner' because he hid his feelings in his heart. He remained in the house all the while hating his father. (Quoted by Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 198)

There is more! The older son attacks his brother – and thereby the father. He accuses the younger son of wasting everything on prostitution – a fact which he can only assume. And his is implicitly questioning the father's intelligence, "look, don't you see? the kid is a loser..."

"The kid does not love you. If he did, he would have saved some of his inheritance to take care of you when you are old. Instead, he squandered your wealth." (Ibid., 199)

The older son insults his father's intelligence, calling into question his ability to see reality.

But the most painful insult of the speech is the last line of his speech: "all these years I have served you and never disobeyed your orders" (v. 29). Do you hear him? The older son is saying that he thinks his relationship with the father is based on his keeping the rules. If he kept the rules and did his duty... then they had a relationship. But what kind of relationship is that? Not parent-child, but master-slave. Do you see the tragedy? All those years the older son missed the point ... like so many of us older sons and daughters.

The younger son came home with a speech. Remember? It had three parts. The third part was "make me one of your hired servants." He thought he could get into good standing with his father by working, by earning. He discovered it is all a matter of grace.

What a tragedy. The older son has been living the third part of the younger son's speech all his life: "all these years I have been serving you." He stayed home. He never went to the far country. But he never knew the father's heart. The father wants children, not slaves.

Everything the older son does wounds and insults his father. How does the father portrayed by Jesus respond to this further insult? You guessed it... scandalously! Again, everyone in that culture expects the father to be furious. But instead, the father again humiliates himself before the village. The father could have ordered the son to carry out his duties. But what would he have gained? So the father again pleads with the older son.

“My son,” says the father (v. 31). The word translated “son” (*teknon*) is a very tender and affectionate word. “My child, my child.” It is more tender and affectionate than the word the father used of the younger son. Older sons and daughters often need that extra assurance of their belovedness. “My child.”

The father continues: “You are always with me, and everything I have is yours” (v. 31). Always... everything. The father assures the older son of his status and rights. The “home-coming” of the younger son need not threaten the older son. God the Father is full of grace. When God gives grace to others He does not take it from us. There is plenty to go around – for younger and older children.

Then the father opens his heart to his son: “But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found” (v. 32). Here Jesus reveals the pleading Father – the Father who pleads for His children to enter His own joy in being gracious.

If the message to the younger son is “come home,” the message to the older son is “come in.” Come in to the father’s heart. All those years the older son thought he was in the father’s house because he was so good, so faithful, so obedient. So when the younger son gets to come home freely, without having to serve for awhile, without having to first conform to all the rules, the older brother is jealous and angry.

Scribes and Pharisees think their relationship with God is based on their performance and character. They therefore demand that sinners and tax-collectors relate to God on the same basis: performance and character. Whenever you and I think we are in the family of God, in the kingdom of God because we earned it, we will expect others to earn their place too.

But we did not earn it! Hear the words of the pleading father:

“My child, my child. Thank you for all your service. Thank you for your diligence. Thank you for seeking to be holy. But that is not why you belong to me. You are my child simply because I love you.”

In his classic book *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Richard Lovelace observes how rampant the “older brother syndrome” is in the church. Lovelace writes:

[Many professing Christians are] drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. Few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther’s platform: you are accepted, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance (101)

I am in the family of God for only one reason: the Father has come out to me, and in His Only-Begotten Son taken on my shame ... and welcomed me in scandalous love. There is no other reason.

So, what are we going to do in response to Jesus’ parable?

Younger brothers and sisters, you law-breakers, you who have gone off to the far country... come home! It is safe to come home. The father is waiting, and will run to embrace you with scandalous love.

Older brothers and sisters, you law-keepers, you who have been in the fathers house and field for many years ... come in! The Father is pleading, come into my heart. Let me love you just because I love you. Let me be the kind of father I am!

I am sure you have noticed that Jesus ends His parable "in mid-air," so to speak. There is no closure, no conclusion. We are not told what the older son will do in response to the scandalous love of his father. How should it end? In light of the cultural setting of the story there are really only two possible endings.

The first finds the older son humbling himself. He recognizes that he has strayed from the father's heart that he has rebelled against and insulted the father. So he gives in and lets the father love him.

The other possible ending finds the older son hardening his heart. This ending finds the older son deciding that he must now vindicate the name of the family which the father has shamed. So Kenneth Bailey cautiously speculates: "Is not he end of the story this: 'Then the elder son in great anger took his stick and beat his father?'" (*Cross*, 73).

Is that not what the scribes and Pharisees ended up doing? They could not handle Jesus' portrait of the Holy One's heart. So, in the name of holiness, they killed the Holy One's self-manifestation. The accusation "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them" gave way to "crucify! crucify! crucify Him!" And they did. They killed the embodiment of the Father's love.

And then, from the cross... comes one more scandalous word. "Father... forgive them... for they know not what they do.