

Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
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And Then What Happened?
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

As a child my mother despaired of taking me to the movies because I talked during them. I would ask questions, point out what I thought was interesting, and need explanations for loose ends. I was particularly troubled when the movie ended with what I thought was an open-ended conclusion. "But then what happened?" I would ask? My mother would tell me that was the end. "But what happened next?" I persisted until I drove my mom crazy altogether. I wanted the end of the story.

We are left with the same sort of unresolved ending in today's parable, popularly known as the Parable of the Prodigal son. It's a familiar story. A man has two sons. One wants to leave to explore the world so he breaks his father's heart by asking for his inheritance (essentially saying I wish you were dead), sets off, and then loses everything.

He sinks to the lowest of the low and then decides to come back home to see if he could be a servant. His father receives him with joy, treats him as a beloved son, and throws a party. The older son is not happy to see the reprobate welcomed back and refuses to go into the party. The father comes out and lovingly pleads with the older son saying, "Come inside and celebrate. The one who was lost has been found."

And then what happens?

What happens next? Jesus leaves us with a close-up shot of father and older son out on the porch. Will the older son come into the party? Will he accept his brother back? Will the father rejoin the celebration or stay outside with the son? Will the younger son's conversion really stick or will he run off again next month? What happens next?

And where do we find ourselves in the story?

Are we the younger brother relieved and overwhelmed sitting inside at his party? Are we the father on the back porch pleading with his older son to come in and reconcile and celebrate his brother's return?

Are we the older son, angry, resentful, refusing to enter, standing outside in the dark?

For they are all prodigals, really. Prodigal can mean wasteful, spendthrift. Or it can mean lavish, generous. The question now is: will the older brother waste the opportunity for joy and hope and love? Or will he, like his father, open his arms to his lost now found brother. Which kind of prodigal will he be? What happens next?

We struggle with this story because it hits us right in our weak spot. We are taught to believe that life is fair; if you work hard, you get rewarded. Bad people will get their just desserts and merit determines your worth. This story flies in the face of all that. It tells us God's kingdom is not a meritocracy. It doesn't work that way. Love and mercy and forgiveness are the standards, not reward and punishment, not a heavenly hierarchy.

A man dies and goes to heaven and St. Peter meets him at the pearly gates. St. Peter says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay," the man says, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

"That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth three points!"

"Three points?" he says. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service."

"Terrific!" says St. Peter, "that's certainly worth a point." "One point? Golly. How about this: I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," he says. "TWO POINTS!!" the man cries, "At this rate the only way I get into heaven is by the grace of God!"

"That's right! Now you have got it!" said St. Peter.

It's not fair. It's grace.

You see those of us like the older brother who in the midst of this parable find ourselves outside sitting in the ashes of this celebration need to think again.

We are not faithful, loving people who work for the good just because it gets us somewhere. Perhaps we do have a piece of that in us. But we are good, we do good, we live lives working towards the good because that is the right thing to do. And because we can see often, not always, that living life that way is its own reward.

Remember the father welcomes the younger son by running to him. He doesn't wait to find out if he is repentant or not.

Theologian Mary Gordon writes, "Jesus is asking us through this parable, [like the one about the workers in the vineyard,] 'Are you envious because I am generous?'"

"It is an impossible question, calling for an impossible honesty, one that makes self-love nearly impossible. The answer: yes. I am envious because you are generous. I am envious because my work has not been rewarded. I am envious because someone got away with something. Envy has eaten out my heart." (Mary Gordon, killingthebuddha.com)

We are envious. It is not fair. It is not right. It is not by the rules. Where is the comeuppance? We are the older brother standing out in the dark refusing the celebration because it has not been earned. We see our life, patched it together after the great hurt, suddenly come wrenched apart again. What will happen next?

We are asked if we will love and forgive and welcome the lost. What do we choose?

Unconditional love and forgiveness hurt. They are not free in the sense that they ask something of us. They ask us to move beyond what is fair and into what is loving. To give up our earned place, to open the door and throw the party for the returned, the lost. We have to give up the anger that blocks us from mending the relationship. We have to give up our sense of what we think we are owed: shaming or punishment, groveling, whatever.

We have to choose to see differently. Instead of seeing things the way they are, the way they have been, we must be willing to set that down and see how things can be, which may be quite different from the way we want things to be or think they should be.

The older brother can only see his younger brother as a colossal screw-up: the money waster, the family breaker.

He also sees his younger brother as a wrinkle in his plans for his life. The older brother figures he has offered faithful service to his father for these many years and thus is in for a great inheritance. And now this...

The older brother stands outside the party and yells to his pleading father, "He spent all your money on whores!" (We don't know that. Only the older brother tells us this and he is hardly the best most reliable witness.)

The older son continues, "Where's my party?!"

The father assures the older son of his love--Abundant love. Overwhelming love. "All I have is yours." But the older son can only seethe with jealousy and the unalterable image of his screw-up brother. There is no room for any other image to enter in.

In my family we have the story of bad Sarah Ellen. This was my grandmother's story and it is about my great aunt on my dad's side. When Sarah Ellen was a child she came to eat at my grandmother's house. The menu included asparagus. Sarah Ellen, being a guest, was served first. When she took the serving plate of asparagus, she proceeded to cut off all the asparagus tips and put them on her plate, leaving the stalks. She then passed the plate along. Oh My Gosh! Gasp. Horror. Shock. My grandmother told this story with such disdain and disgust and horror. That Sarah Ellen!

I have never actually met my great aunt Sarah Ellen. This is actually the only story I ever heard about her--the narrative was always the same. She has always been and forever will be in my mind, an eleven year old girl, committing an unforgivable sin, eating all the asparagus tips. Bad Sarah Ellen. Ungrateful Sarah Ellen. Greedy Sarah Ellen. In my mind, she never got another identity.

How much harder is it to give another identity, to offer forgiveness and love, to someone who is close to us, to someone who has hurt us, to someone we relate to with anger or estrangement.

We struggle to accept God's expansive grace and love for those who have harmed us and others we love. For those who have divided our families, or damaged our livelihoods. Tim Marvil writes, "- how [the older brother] reacts with indignation is truly how many to most of us would. How many of us have "worthless siblings" we have distaste for? The real lesson may be for us to understand what it means to forgive others who have wronged [us or] other people - people who we value and when they are dishonored we are angry. (Tim Marvil, midrash list serv)

Jesus tells this parable to the religious leaders who are grumbling that he eats with sinners and tax collectors. The parable is a clearly pointed story asking these leaders, cast assuredly as the older brother, why they are so resistant to God's abundant, forgiving, abiding love. A love that runs to receive us. A love that never is taken from us, no matter what we do. The father runs down the road to greet the son, a totally undignified and shameful act in that culture. He doesn't even wait to hear if he is repentant or home to ask for more money. He offers love and extravagant welcome.

As Augustine says, "God loves each one of us, as if there were only one of us to love."

Jesus lets the question linger in the air. Shouldn't it be a celebration that the son is back? That the lost are found?

It is only those of us who already think we are worthy, who believe we have earned our way into God's grace, who have been the stick to the homestead and work hard and follow all the rules and we'll surely get the goodies, who are upset by this.

What? We did all this and he gets the party!

Even when the father reassures the son--all I have is yours--the older son stands on the threshold.

Will the older son walk into the party? What happens next?

Does the younger son go on another bender?

Does older son always make him feel bad, "well... remember the time when you left" — a grudging grace, conditional forgiveness?

Does the younger son ever get to get a new identity, one not founded on the past but founded on the present?

Does the father grieve now not a son lost to a foreign land but a son lost to his anger and jealousy?

Do grace and love prevail?

What happens next?

In my imagination I envision the older son and the younger son sitting down together at some point. Embarrassment on one side and resentment on the other. Until the younger son talks about what it was really like to be gone. Until he shares with his brother that the life he led of drinking and gambling and having sex and spending money was empty. Bankrupt. And it left his soul empty. Bankrupt.

And that when he hit bottom, and for a pious Jew, living and eating with pigs would be about as far down as one could go, all the son could think about was home. And I imagine the younger son talking about what home looks like to someone who has thrown it all away only to realize that what he wanted the most was right where he started.

Could the older son hear that? The younger one saying, you don't know how lucky you are. You don't know what it is like to live with the nightmares, the scars, the shame of the life I led. You have lived here inside this circle of love and hope and life this whole time. A herd of fatted calves could not change that.

Can we understand that? Those of us who feel like eldest brothers, working and working while others do nothing. Those of us who are faithful to our work and our homes and our church and the established order of things and are then presented with folks who drop in and are now are granted a full inheritance of what we have been stewards of. Can we open our hearts to the greater arc of grace, ever widening?

This story plays out in all of our lives. We know those who are lost. We have been lost ourselves. We stand at the gate waiting. We stand outside the party angry. We live amidst broken relationships and estrangement. We live with anger and frozen identities. We live with those who are the good children and the bad ones. Lost sheep and heroes alike.

The question is: what happens next?

Forgiveness is not permission. It doesn't mean that you agree with what the offender has done, or that they had a right to do what they did. Also, forgiveness cannot be conditional on remorse

because that would mean we can only forgive those who are sorry. Forgiveness is an opportunity to create a new and hopeful beginning.

As we move through the final part of our interim time together this a pointed question for all of you. What kind of church shall you be moving forward?

Are you invested in the tabulation of blame for the past?

Are you invested in a new future, free to welcome back those who have left, open to a future based on respect and love for neighbor and self?

Are you willing to tackle the hard conversations when things go wrong so that having to leave is not the only answer for a time of conflict?

Are you able to forgive the past and those you feel have done wrong to you or to this community of faith?

The answer is up to you. What happens next? What kind of prodigal do you want to be?

Amen.