

The Parable of the Loving Father
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Luke 15:11-32

I spent a lot of time with this passage on my retreat in the summer of 2014. This was assigned as one of my passages during the middle of the 7 days. The subject for that day was sin and forgiveness and this is probably **the** passage to use for that topic.

My first response to this passage is to think about how easy it is to be the older brother. Upset at the unfairness of the father's action. To think and feel that I'm better than that person and why are they rewarded is so easy and a place many of us can relate to, especially those of us who are the oldest child in a family. So that is one way that sin estranges us from others and ultimately from God for we are called to act as the father acted no matter how hard it is.

However as I entered in to a second and third reading, verse 22 in the Message translation caught my attention. Luke 15:22 "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.'" Stop and think about that statement for a moment. The **father wasn't even listening** to the excuses but commanding the servants to welcome him home. So let us enter into the parable as the returning son just a little before this point.

We hear from the returning son:

I am coming up the long road to the front gate of my father's house. It is very hot but there is a breeze blowing that stirs the dust around me. I've been walking all day and it is afternoon. Actually I've been walking for several days and I'm exhausted, tired, thirsty. I'm sure I must stink of pigs. I'm unclean in every sense of the word. My clothes are rags and one of my sandals has almost fallen off of my foot. I have been both looking forward to this moment and at the same time dreading it. I know I have sinned, I know I am wrong and I pray that he will not slam the door in my face. How could I have been so unfeeling, so immature, so stupid?

What's this? Father has come running out of his house with Reuben his personal servant running behind him. My father must have been in his study and has not taken the time to put on the clothes he would normally wear when he would go outside the house to the fields. I've never seen him outside dressed with just a simple robe on. He has obviously hurried to meet me and Reuben isn't happy at this display. In fact I don't think I have ever seen my father run. Important people never run in my world.

I fall at his feet and begin the speech I have been rehearsing for days and days as I traveled home in disgrace. I'm so ashamed of the mess that I have made. I'm hoping, no praying he will at least let me back in the house. But while I'm launching into my speech I realize he has bent over and lifted me to my knees. "Don't touch me, I am unclean, I have been with pigs you will defile yourself if you touch me." It doesn't matter. He hugs me. It feels both comforting and uncomfortable. There is no anger here. I am shocked, surprised and relieved.

Father is looking over my head and speaking to Reuben his servant. "Go get one of my good robes, the family ring and for gosh sakes some new sandals. Command the cook to slaughter the fatted calf and prepare a banquet. Invite my friends and tell them that my son is finally home."

I'm truly stunned, amazed, surprised and totally confused. He is not even listening to me. Father should be furious at me. In silence Reuben helps me to my feet and leads me into the house, strips off my rags and prepares a bath of cool water for me. I get in and tell Reuben that I don't understand, he didn't even listen to my excuses my apologies. Reuben just nods his head but is silent for a little while. As Reuben washes my hair and takes a razor to cut out the tangles he begins to tell me of the grief he has observed in my father ever since I left.

Reuben tells me, "The day you left he was in this very tub. I've never seen him so upset. He told me that he did not understand why you had done this and he was deeply hurt.. Oh he was disappointed and yes a little angry when you left, but mostly his heart was broken. Yet he has prayed every day for your return Of course he is overjoyed to see you back."

"What you do not understand nor do you know that he sent people to look for you. He found you and knows all the things that you have been doing. But he told the people he sent after you to be patient and wait to see if they could talk to you, bring you to your senses. In fact he knew about the day when you finally woke up in that pig pen and decided to come home. He knew that some day you would return." He's been waiting for you.

I sob in the tub as the full impact of the words washes over me like the water Reuben is pouring over my head. I am so ashamed. Then Reuben takes water from the jars that are there for purification and pours that water over me. I feel the shame of my sin being washed away in this traditional Jewish rite.

As the dirt and sin is washed from me, and the tangles in my beard and hair are trimmed I begin to feel human again. I'm a new person. Reuben brings me one of my father's robes. It is soft and smells of him. The family ring is back on my finger and somehow Reuben has found a new pair of sandals that fit me. The leather smells wonderful and they are so soft on my calloused feet. I can smell the feast being prepared for my return. Now it is my turn to cry again, this time to

weep with joy at the forgiveness and love that my father has shown me. If I had only known I might have come home sooner.

The son concludes his thoughts:

You see this parable really should have a different name. Several commentators suggest that this parable should be named the parable of the loving father. For that is the focus that Jesus really wants us to have.

This is the third of three parables. The first one is the parable of the lost sheep where the shepherd leaves the 99 to find the one missing sheep. The second is the parable of the woman with the lost coin her turns her house upside down to find the coin and then celebrates with her neighbors when she is successful. The focus is not so much on the one who is lost for neither the sheep or the coin will return on its own, but on the one doing the searching.

Jesus is showing us in this parable the image of a loving and merciful God that he knows. For it is clear that the Father is God and this is Jesus' way of teaching an image of God that our world desperately needs. We live in a world desperate for an image of God that is one of love and mercy. Many cannot understand how the father in this story can be so forgiving. Well that is because the father is God and God's forgiveness, God's love knows no limit. AMEN.