

THE PRODIGAL'S MOTHER

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Monologue from the perspective of the prodigal son's mother:

“Let me see...one fatted calf, check; 2 barrels of the finest wine, check; platters of dates, olives, figs and grapes, check; plain pita and matzo breads, check, check. Oh yes, and humus, mounds and mounds of humus. Nothing is too good for our boy!

Oh, excuse me; I did not see you there! We are having huge party tomorrow night in honor of our younger son and there are just so many details for it to be a huge success. I see by your faces that you are wondering the reason for such a lavish feast, well I will tell you, the baby of the family, our youngest son has been gone, lost really for what seems like forever, and just last night he came home! The God of Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham answered my prayers and he returned home! Yahweh be praised! It really is quite a story. Do you have time to hear it? I am not sure I have time to tell you the whole thing, but it really is simply too wonderful...you must hear it!

It all began one fateful afternoon when our youngest son, Caleb got the courage up to ask his father for his inheritance...while his father still lived! I had seen Caleb's restlessness, but had no idea he would insult his father so brazenly. I really don't think he wished his father dead, but that is the message he sent in asking for his inheritance. But my Jacob, Yahweh be praised, has a heart as big as all of Israel and granted Caleb his wish. He split his estate evenly between the two boys, Jacob, Jr. (we call him Junior!) also received his inheritance as was only fair – another one of my Jacob's sterling qualities. The ink was barely dry on the papyrus when Caleb sold his share of the farm, packed his bags and took off for parts unknown. It was heartbreaking enough for Jacob when Caleb asked for his inheritance, but to go and sell the land which had been in the family for generations nearly killed him. I saw him age right before my eyes.

Months went by with no word from Caleb. Junior continued putting his shoulder to the plow, working hard day and night. Then we started hearing stories about Caleb living the high life in the city and realized it was really better when we had had no news. Some of our neighbors recognized him carousing with a bad crowd, spending his money on lavish parties, women of the night on each arm. We thought Caleb wanted to start out on his own with the sale of his part of the farm, but if the stories we heard were true, he was literally throwing it away with his lifestyle. He certainly was not living his life the way Jacob and I had raised him.

Then one day our worst nightmare became true. Caleb had spent all of his inheritance and the “crowds” of friends had abandoned him to his fate. A severe famine had come to the area where he was living, and Caleb was destitute. We heard the only work he could find was to feed pigs at a farm. He was so hungry he ate with the pigs. Jacob and I wept when we heard this.

Junior kept working hard building up his herd and harvesting crops. Every once in a while he would make snide comments about his n'er do well brother, but both Jacob and I barely heard him so deep was our grief. Every night after supper, Jacob and I would sit on the porch; me with my never-ending basket of mending; Jacob staring off in the distance.

One night while sitting there, Jacob seemed to catch his breath. I quickly looked at him to make sure he was okay, when it happened again. He brought his hand up to shield his eyes from the dazzling sunset, slowly began to rise from his seat. I heard him mutter, “No, it can’t be!” “Yes, YES, it is!” It was my turn to shield my eyes and all I could see was this moving speck on the horizon. Suddenly, Jacob was on his feet watching the speck grow larger as it moved then all at once Jacob was running as fast as he could go. I still did not know what or who was out there; I just kept my eyes on Jacob. The speck grew larger and larger and all at once I realized what Jacob had seen. It was Caleb and he was coming home. I picked up my skirts and ran as fast as I could to catch up to the two of them. I could see Jacob and Caleb hugging and crying together. Just as I reached the two of them, I heard Caleb trying to say something to his father, but it was muffled because of Jacob’s embrace. It sounded like, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son any longer...”

I don’t know if Jacob heard him because all at once he was shouting to our servants, “Hurry, bring the best clothes and put them on him! Put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet! Bring the calf we’ve been fattening, kill it, and roast it...we are having a party!! This son of mine was dead and he is alive again. He was lost and now he’s found!”

This is the party I was working on when I first noticed all of you sitting here. The celebration is in full swing and the calf is ready for carving. I must find Jacob to do the honors. I have his favorite knife...but wait, someone is yelling in the back of the house. It sounds like Junior. He sounds so angry. I better check it out. Oh no, Jacob is pleading with Junior to come join the celebration. But Junior refuses saying, “Look here! I have been slaving for you all these years; I have never disobeyed a single order of yours. You have never even given me a young goat so I could have a party with my friends. But when this son of yours comes home, once he has squandered away his inheritance with his friends and temple prostitutes, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

At first it was quiet. Then slowly, with tears in his voice I heard Jacob say to Junior, “My son, you have always been with me. Everything I have is yours. Your brother was dead to us but has come home and is alive again! He was lost and now he is found!” Junior simply threw up his hands in disgust and stormed off. Jacob’s shoulders sagged with renewed grief as he turned back to the celebration.

It was in that moment that I realized I had not one, but two prodigal sons. Caleb was the prodigal who had to leave to realize the depth of his father’s love for him. He had to get to the depths of despair to realize the value of his Father. Junior was the prodigal who stayed home who had no more respect for his father than did his younger brother. I saw this in how he treated Jacob. Junior had no greater understanding of his father’s love for him than Caleb.

Thank you for listening. If you don’t have any plans, follow me for the best feast you will ever eat!!

Going out of character; becoming Pastor Tizzy again!

As I shared a mother's interpretation of this well-known parable of the Prodigal Son, were you able to enter into the story? With whom did you identify the most? Are you the younger son determined to waste his inheritance? Maybe you are the dutiful self-righteous older son who saw himself as the 'victim' in this story. Anyone here identify with the Father? Anyone feel a kinship toward the boy's mother? For most of my life, I strongly identified with the older son. I was the dutiful daughter who obeyed the rules doing what was expected of me. I used to see this story as an age-old story of sibling rivalry with the Father playing favorites first by giving the younger son his inheritance while still alive, and secondly by welcoming him home with open arms. I felt the older son had been given short shrift with the father making this huge deal about the younger son's homecoming. At least I did until I realized how blessed I am to have a heavenly Father whose forgiveness is not only complete, it is never-ending.

Tenderness is more than sentimental love. Indeed, the parable equates tenderness with mercy. Mercy is compassionate love. In Jesus' story, the father looks on his repentant son with tenderness and demonstrates mercy toward him. The father actively forgives his son for squandering his fortune, and he restores the son to the family through acceptance, hospitality and forgiveness. Tenderness opens the door to mercy; these actions heal a broken family; and unexpected justice results.

While the bulk of Jesus' story focuses on the younger son, the point may have more to do with the older one. The original audience for this parable isn't a nameless group of people gathered on a hillside. Luke tells us exactly to whom these words were addressed: Pharisees and legal experts -- older brothers -- who are grumbling about Jesus welcoming tax collectors and sinners -- younger brothers. Jesus tells this story so sinners can know their value in the eyes of God.

The Pharisees and legal experts had reputations for giving up on certain segments of their society. People were labeled as sinners, tax collectors, Samaritans, adulterers and lepers. They were the "unclean," unwelcome in worship, unwelcome among those who saw their position with God as secure. The labeling was a convenient way of dismissing others and absolving themselves from any responsibility of caring for them. (Homiletics online, 2019)

We shudder to think how people could do such a thing, but we see it still today. There are those who stand on the side of the road with placards pointing out the sins of others. Others use the virtual roadsides of Facebook and other social media sites to blame outsiders, sinners and ethnic groups for problems in our country and our world. We, too, label people -- think of the possibilities! -- and thereby dismiss them. We cast them out. We discard them. In some circles, people use expressions such as "white trash" or "trailer trash" to refer to human beings.

When we read the gospels, we find Jesus on the fringes where he meets those who have been tossed aside. There, Jesus heals lepers, forgives tax collectors, eats with sinners and welcomes a woman with a questionable reputation who came to a well in the middle of the day. I, for one, am so thankful that Jesus sees value in each and every one of us.

Bottom line, the parable of the Prodigal Son shows us the overwhelming truth about God and God's kingdom. We human beings are all lost; stuck in sins of selfishness and greed, "It's all about me and my needs!" This is the unmistakable human condition and in spite of this, God

reached out through the people of Israel and then in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is not just about you and me, my sin or your sin, my deserts or your deserts. It is about God and God's life-giving love and mercy. Every time God's active, searching, healing love finds someone and calls that person back home, it does not mean there is less for us. It means there is more. More wine, more feasting, more dancing, and unending love. (Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume 2.)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.