

## A New Creation©

2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 5:11b-32

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What a wonderful story this is. This story, and the one about the Good Samaritan, are probably the most loved of all the stories Jesus told, wouldn't you agree?

We get three very different characters in the story:

1. The rebellious, self-serving son, who is so inconsiderate of his father, that he asks for his inheritance even before his father has died, which is the same as saying his father was dead to him; that he didn't care about him.
2. Then there is the father, full of compassion, who welcomes his son home with such joy that he goes all out, throwing a party with the best calf he owns for the main entre.
3. And, of course, there is the older brother, who is angry, hurt, and unwilling to join the party. He has worked hard for their father. He has been loyal and never caused his father a day of grief.

So, where would you be in this story? Who do you relate to best?

I have to admit, as the oldest sibling in a family of six children, I can relate pretty well to that older brother.

Growing up, I was mostly a rule follower. I cared a great deal about pleasing my mom and not doing anything to cause her pain or embarrassment. It meant a lot to me that she trusted me; that she relied on me to be responsible and to help her with my younger brothers and sisters.

You can imagine how self-righteous I could be when my younger siblings didn't really care about following the rules!

Two of my sibs were just the right age to be drawn into the hippie era. They grew their hair long and wild. They smoked something from some unusual looking pipes. They dressed different. They listened to weird music and they talked really funny.

They paid no attention to any curfews and they didn't seem to really care that mom was worried about them. I couldn't imagine how they could be so inconsiderate. Truth is, I worried a lot about them myself. And I was very skeptical when they would return home, asking for help and begging forgiveness. I didn't think they meant it. And, of course, mom would help, and I would be angry.

Whatever happened to following the rules and being obedient and pleasing your parents?

Oh, I could be very much that older brother. I knew how to be self righteous, and I'm sure there were times I practiced it quite openly.

On the other hand, I have to admit, there was a time when I actually experienced what it was like to be the one in that far away country; to feel like the lost son who had turned against the ones who loved me most. I guess you could say that, in a way, I was dead.

That might sound a little dramatic. And it might be an exaggeration, but I can say that for a little while, there was a period in my life that I felt like that. I felt shame and remorse for turning away from what I had been taught, from hurting my parents and not being who I really wanted to be. I knew I was not pleasing God either.

So, I can honestly say I could put myself in the shoes of either of the brothers. Could you? Can you relate to one or more of these characters in Jesus' story?

And what about the Father? I think most of us who are parents, can understand what the father felt. He surely was crushed that his son would ask for his inheritance before he had even died. Money was tied up in land and livestock. So to give the son his inheritance, he probably had to sell off some of what he had. But he did it.

We might think he was a little foolish and naïve. He spoiled his younger son by giving him something he really didn't deserve and clearly wasn't ready for. But, out of love, he did it anyway. Even if it meant he held no place of love and respect in his younger son's eyes.

It's hard sometimes, not to want to give your child everything they want; to lavish them with as much as you can. You do it, and you hope it will be good and not something that ends up being harmful to them instead.

And this father waits and longs for his son, not giving up hope that he would return. He watches the path leading to the house.

How long, how often did he look, I wonder?

And when the day comes that he sees his son wandering back up the road – thin and destitute, starving and ragged – the father runs to him and throws his arms around him, overjoyed that the son has come home.

He doesn't even hear what the son is saying – that he would just be a servant, that he doesn't deserve to be his son. No, the father is calling for a fine robe to be put around him, and sandals to be put on his tired, dirty feet.

Ha! No servant wore sandals. Only a child of the family wore shoes.

And the ring – the ring with the family seal on it, the seal that says who you belong to, whose family you are in, who your daddy is. That ring that was placed on his bony finger said it all.

My dad spent a lot of time doing research on the DeHaven family, who originally came from Holland. And we have pictures of the DeHaven family seal. It was stamped on legal documents. There was no seal that was just like that one. That seal belonged to my family.

So for this father to place that family ring on his son's finger – the ring bearing the family seal – that was a big deal. This son has come home to the family. "You are my son! You belong here, in this family."

The father's heart – a heart that had been broken over losing a son – was now overjoyed; was full of nothing but compassion and forgiveness and grace. "This son of mine was lost," he cried, "and now he is found. He was dead, but now he is alive!"

Such pure joy! What unconditional love and grace.

Oh yeah. I can relate to that father, too. I know I would be that way with any one of my children who had wandered away from me. I would be so ready to welcome them home and to forgive anything they had done. I love them with a love I cannot explain. It is just pure love for those who are a part of me.

This story, you see, has so much meaning and is so well loved because it is a story we can all relate to in some way. Most of us have had some time that we've spent in that far away, distant land of loneliness, shame, despair, hopelessness - and often remorse; afraid to go home, yet dying to go.

We long for home and our parents love to the point of finally drudging up the courage to get there, counting on that love to forgive and give us another chance. It is a love that is like no other.

Many of us have experienced the feelings of anger and jealousy and self-righteousness that the older brother felt. And why not? He had done everything right.

But there is danger in allowing our self to think we are above reproach. There is a great need for forgiveness in that attitude, as well.

And the thing is, even if we have some sense of what it feels like to be the father, none of us could compare to the Father whom Jesus is telling about in this story.

Jesus is telling this to a group that includes tax collectors and sinners. He is within earshot of the Pharisees and scribes who were complaining because Jesus was associating with these sinners, even eating at their table.

It was disgraceful! Here they were, the cream of the crop, the ones who obeyed the rules and who tried to keep everyone else on the right track. How dare Jesus be so caring toward those sinners?

But Jesus is saying God is like that father. Always waiting and watching and rejoicing when one who has turned away comes home. God loves and has compassion, forgives and spreads out a feast – a celebration for the one who has come home. He puts his seal on them that says you are mine. You are part of my family.

I love the words in baptism that says “Child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

God’s seal, God’s stamp that marks us as his own is an invisible one that we all share in this family as we pass through the waters of baptism – forever his. And as Paul writes, “In Christ we are a new creation. That old, lost, dead life of sin is past. And a new life has begun.”

God, the Father watches and never gives up hoping and waiting for His lost children to return home where he can welcome them with forgiveness and love and grace; where he can put his family seal on them.

It makes me think of that old gospel hymn:  
“Softly and Tenderly, Jesus is calling.  
Calling for you and for me.

See, on the portal, he’s waiting and watching.  
Watching for you and for me.

Come home. Come home. You who are weary come home. Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling. Calling, O sinner, come home.”

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