

Grace Versus Justice©
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Luke 15:11-32

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So who do you identify with in this story that is so familiar any one of us could pretty much recite it from memory? There are some of us who relate very well to the younger son. He was self-centered, wasn't he? He couldn't wait to get off the farm. He did not want to hang around, waiting for his father to die so that he could finally get his inheritance.

Of course, he already knew that he would not get as much as his older brother. In fact, he would get a smaller portion of the money from some of the savings and property but he wouldn't inherit the land his father owned. He could probably live on the land and help run it but it would never belong to him.

We can understand his desire to get out and make it on his own; make a name for himself that wasn't always and forever tied to his older brother and his father.

Except that isn't what he did. Some kids just go hog wild when they are cut loose from their mother's apron strings – or in this case – their father's supervision. And wild he was!

This young man spent his inheritance on anything and everything his heart desired – until it was completely gone. He found himself in another country, in a land of famine, working for a pig farmer with nothing to his name. He was starving and was willing to even eat what the pigs ate.

That sounds pretty gross to me, doesn't it you? But, for him – a Jewish boy – it was profoundly gross and wrong! Just being around pigs was disgusting, was vile, and made him unclean. Which made him an outcast and a sinner in the eyes of the Jews. What a hopeless pit he had put himself into.

Have you ever been in that place? A disgusting self-made prison that felt so deep, so far away from the love and care you had known, that you were sure there was no possibility of ever going back? No hope of redemption?

Some of us will not be able to identify with that deep feeling of despair. But some of us will know exactly how that feels.

I like the part where Jesus says, "He came to himself." Somewhere in all that despair and self-loathing, he suddenly not only saw what he had become but he remembered who his father was and he came to believe – to have a glimmer of hope – that his father would be merciful and allow him to come back. He did not expect, or plan on asking to have his place back as the beloved son again. All he would ask for was a place to sleep and food to eat as a servant of his father. He would go and humbly and gladly be a slave. He remembered the kind of father he had.

And we hear the good news that his father saw him coming from the distance. Apparently he was watching and waiting and hoping for his son to return. His father went out to welcome him with open arms, with love and mercy even before the son could talk to him. And he wasn't going to hear of his son being a slave.

The father put a robe around his son's shoulders, and a ring on his finger that was the signet of the family. The signet was the special seal – the picture that was like the stamp, the family signature. These things meant he was an important member of the family.

He put sandals on his son's feet because only a slave would wear no shoes. The beloved son would not be barefoot.

His father then called for a celebration with the rich, roasted meat of a fatted calf – a feast to celebrate the return of one who was, as the father proclaimed, “dead, but now alive! Lost, but now is found!”

And then there is the older brother, who came in from a long, hard day's work out in the field, who was confused when he smelled the smoke from the roasted meat and heard music and laughter. And he asked one of the servants, “What's going on?”

The servant told him his brother was home and his father was throwing a party – including the roasting of the fatted calf they'd been saving up.

“Say what???” said the brother. Where's the justice in this picture? Instead of punishment for a wayward, lazy, selfish son, he gets a welcome with a lavish party!

How many of us relate to this brother? He has been the good one; the loyal one who does everything right. He's always there to help his father. He's never worried or angered his father, even a day in his life. He's been good as gold, a hard worker.

We can just hear him crying out to the father when he comes looking for him. “That's not fair!” he whines.

And we all know it's not. Right? In a world of right and wrong and consequences and justice and morals – you name it – it's just not fair.

Some of us can relate to this older brother, can't we? We've tried all our lives to do what is right. We try to be nice, to work hard, to earn what we have, to not disappoint, to be rule keepers, to not get in trouble.

Some of you may have heard this story before ... When I was around eight years old, and my brother David was six, my dad did a funny little thing to surprise us. As the oldest, I had a little self-righteous sense of being the responsible one. I tried awfully hard to please and to not get in trouble (although I confess that didn't always work).

But this particular day, I had been very good. My dad came to my room to tell me goodnight. But instead, he whispered, “You've been so good today, I'm going to give you a special surprise. Pretty soon, when you hear me whistling in the living room, you can get up and tiptoe into the room and watch television with mom and me. But be very quiet so your brother doesn't know.” (There was some special on TV that he knew I would enjoy.)

I lay there smiling (okay, smirking) in the dark, very pleased with myself, feeling very special indeed.

So, after he had had a chance to tell David goodnight in his room and a little time went by, I finally heard him whistling. I got out of bed and quietly tiptoed into the living room – where I almost ran smack dab into my brother David, as he was doing the exact same thing!!!!

My dad and mom thought it was a very funny trick to play on us. I don't know for sure what David thought, but I, for one, did not think it was very funny. I had this self-righteous feeling that I was the one who deserved to have the special treatment and that David did not. He hadn't been that good on that day! He'd actually gotten into trouble.

But my dad's desire was to treat us both with the same special surprise, regardless of who had been the best behaved that day. We both got to stay up late and watch the show and have hot chocolate and feel special.

But my own sense of self-righteousness and jealousy almost ruined the joy of that special time.

There is a danger in always watching for fairness, measuring what is right and what is just; in harboring jealousy for those who are offered love and grace when it seems undeserved.

And the danger is that our own hearts have the potential to harden and shrink and it robs us of joy and of the ability to be full of grace and compassion ourselves. And that makes us just as lost as the one who physically wandered away.

This is the third parable Jesus tells about finding the lost and about the great joy and celebrating that happens with God and all the heavenly hosts when a sinner is returned home. When the lost is found.

This is a lesson that Jesus was trying to teach the Pharisees and the Scribes – the rulers of the Jewish law. They were so intent on keeping the law and all the rules; they were so bent on judging those who were unclean

... disgusting tax collectors who robbed and cheated the people, and sinners who had defiled themselves with things that were filthy and unholy – in their rigid false piety they had lost the joy of serving God; they had hardened their hearts and become judgmental to the point of there being no place for grace and mercy.

And Jesus is pointing out that the Father – that God – is like the father in the story. Grace trumps justice in this case. Love wins out over what is fair. Mercy and forgiveness and compassion; hospitality and welcome and celebration is what it's about in God's realm.

Who do you identify with in this story? The younger son who was lost and then found? Who was as good as dead and then resurrected and redeemed? The older brother who was hurting and felt jealous that his father could so easily forgive – after all he's done for the father?

Both had a need to repent. Right? One, of his wayward ways that literally took him far away from the father. The other, of his self-righteous pride and unforgiving spirit that put a wedge between his heart and his father's.

I am glad to tell you the good news in this story! Wherever you are in this parable – or even if you have long come home from either place – be assured that you – that we all have a heavenly Father who is full of unending mercy and grace, who forgives us of our sin, who welcomes us home, who has shown us great compassion and mercy through his Son, Jesus.

Whether we wander far away or we are bent too far on the side of perfection and justice – we are loved beyond measure. We belong to him and he rejoices with great celebration when we return with humble hearts.

We can all say, “I once was lost, but now I’m found.” Amazing grace. How sweet the sound!

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