

The Cast | People Engaged in the Story of Jesus Christ

Bad People

Luke 15

March 4, 2018

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him.² Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

¹¹ And He said, "A man had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. ¹³ And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. ¹⁴ Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. ¹⁷ But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men." ²⁰ So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; ²³ and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. ²⁹ But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; ³⁰ but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

This is a follow up sermon to one we heard two weeks ago called "Good People"... Today's sermon is called "Bad People" because all the bad people crowding around Jesus Christ when He taught troubled the spiritual and moral folks... And not only was Jesus permitting these bad people to listen to His speeches, He was apparently encouraging it..."This man receives (welcomes) sinners and eats with them." That was, to the good folks a tacit approval of their bad lifestyles.

The chapter is a description of this problem (vv. 1-2) and then a three-fold answer to the problem: three parables (a lost sheep is found, a lost coin is found and a lost son is found) and the logical result is to be happy and to invite others to celebrate with you.

The third story is the focus of today's sermon. You're familiar with it but there's always something NEW to see here... It compresses the main idea of Christianity...and it does it in a way that's been the basis of many stories/plays because there's something universal here: the longing to be home, to be admitted, welcomed, celebrated... AND...what we may NOT have seen is another universal theme i.e. our tendency to want bad people to have consequences ...to get what they deserve...and therefore we may stand aloof and may not receive/welcome them.

Which character are YOU in this Parable of the Wasteful Sons and Their Wasteful Father? 1) The Younger Son 2) The Older Son and 3) The Father 4) The Other Character

The Younger Son symbolizes of the bad people. He's an escapist. He's so determined to get away that he's willing to act as if his father has died. He asks for his share of the estate and that's a way of saying, "Dad, I can't WAIT for you to die...I want your stuff more than I want YOU!" (the GIFTS more than the GIVER).

And the Father cooperates... He gives him his share of the estate... The word "prodigal" means wasteful or extravagant... it's usually called The Prodigal Son but maybe it should be called The Prodigal Father ...would you dads agree to this request? (more on that in a minute).

So the young escapist ESCAPES...goes to the far country and makes a lot of friends (we suppose) and "he squandered his estate with loose living" (v.13) that's where we get the traditional title, "prodigal".

Then when he ran out of money (wasted everything) he was in need just as the local economy tanked and he takes a job working for a gentile farmer feeding pigs (this would've been the worst part of the story for the original audience)... And the pig food looked good to him and NO ONE was helping him and THAT'S when he remembered that extravagant dad of his... And he thought, "Hmmm...my dad treats his day-laborers better than I'm being treated...let me go and fess up and see if he'll hire me... I acted like he was dead...so I'm obviously NO LONGER HIS SON... but maybe I could be a day laborer."

Now, this character is probably the best known in the parable...it's usually NAMED after him... and again, he stands for the bad people whom Jesus Christ received and WITH WHOM He actually ATE!

There are in the congregation TODAY...some of these people... who look back on a wasted youth... people who squandered opportunities and who may have suffered serious consequences...failed to earn a degree when that was a possibility (maybe it is NO LONGER a possibility). We have people who have "done time"...people who have divorced, who have profound regrets for wasting time, resources and opportunities... AND who (while IN the far country) came to their senses. You know the type.

Andrew Sullivan in New York Magazine two weeks ago wrote an astounding article on opioid addiction ("The Poison We Pick"). For two years in a row our national life expectancy has declined because of opioid-related deaths... We lost more people last year alone than we lost in the entire Vietnam War. People find life in the modern world so difficult that they want to sleep...to escape...an escape crisis.

And... isn't there...in most of us...maybe it's fair to say, "in ALL of us"...an escapist? Didn't the Psalmist say, "Oh that I had wings like a dove, I would fly away and be at rest..." (Ps 55.6)?

Do you ever want to get away? Paul Simon: "I know a woman, became a wife / These are the very words she uses to describe her life / She said "A good day ain't got no rain" / She said "A bad day's when I lie in bed / And I think of things that might have been / Slip slidin' away..."

And isn't that it...that lying in bed...and pondering our regrets...coveting another life... a distant country ... escape into a million addictions/diversions/dreams?

And that brings us to the Older Son. He was NOT an escapist. "I have BEEN here...serving you...never did I neglect a command of yours..." (Coming in from the field!)

He, of course, represents the good people, the moral and spiritual/religious people who wondered why Jesus was condoning these WASTERS...and their wasteful life-styles...receiving them and eating...!

"Here we ARE... NOT running to some exotic place...we stick with it... day after day...obeying God's Laws and serving... but these loosey-goosey wasters are sitting in the front rows as this Rabbi teaches...and He welcomes them... what an INSULT to US!"

But on further observation we note that the older brother does not really share the heart of the father... The older brother sees the father as a master ("I have been serving you...and you never gave me even a goat to celebrate with my friends...")

He sees the father as stingy...and IF he could ever find time to celebrate (the way that WASTERS do) well he'd do it with his friends... I wonder #1) Does he HAVE any friends? #2) Why doesn't he want to celebrate with the father? Is it because he sees the father only as an authority/master/boss? #3) Have we read anything that leads us to see this father as stingy? (Everything points to the opposite!)

And then he sees HIMSELF as perfectly obedient: "I have NEVER neglected a command of yours". The two little parables we skipped over say, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." BUT WHO NEEDS NO REPENTANCE?

Everyone needs repentance because we all fail in our thoughts words and deeds all the time... but that's not how the older brother sees himself...and not how the good people in the audience saw themselves! They NEED no repentance...perfect.

And in the end, this older brother could point to a life-long track-record, a service record...a punch-list that was hard-evidence of how good a man he was... But it turns out HE DOES NOT SHARE THE HEART OF HIS FATHER...he has used his service to keep his father at arm's length ("Get off my back old man! I've done everything you demanded.")

"Demanded? Is that how you see me...as a demander and not a dad? You're my child ("tekon"), my son, not my employee..."

The father in The Book of Proverbs says, "Give me your heart, my son..." (23.26 et al) and the Law is summarized in the words, "Love the LORD with all your ...HEART"... But this worker, this employee, this slave...doesn't see that he's a beloved son...and has NEVER given his father his heart...does not share the heart of the father... But he does have a track-record! And that's the MAIN THING...but it's NOT.

As it turns out... this son is LIVING with his father but his heart is somewhere else (Isa 29.13; Mk 7.6)... in the distant country... He too has squandered a relationship with the father (like his brother); he too is a wasteful, prodigal son.

And I certainly see myself in him... doing for God...working...serving...slaving...and with so little recognition or reward...and yet not sharing the heart of God...the celebrating heart of our FATHER.

Maybe you too...maybe you had daily Bible readings this week...maybe you tithed...served...obeyed...but did you feel the Father's delight...and did you hear His almighty and tender voice saying, "All I have is yours...come...child...let's rejoice...and BE together"

And that brings us to the Father... He is willing to let His children roam...wander...run away (fly like a dove, like Jonah...which means, "Dove")... The Father will even give us His resources to be wasted in our silly attempts at "self-expression"... He may let us roam far afield (into the distant country) but His eye is always on the horizon...He waits for us to come to our senses and remember that God is good...and crazy generous...extravagant...the Prodigal God.

He wants to bring us into the House of Joy... He rejoices over us when we return, when we run out of juice...when we come as younger-brother types AND as older-brother types... When we have roamed into some form of sexy-sin or addiction to substances (e.g. food, alcohol, drugs or stuff) or process-addictions (like shopping or pornography or people-pleasing or gambling ...or hobbies...obsessions)... OR when we have stayed the course ...and done all His directives ...and

yet our hearts are far from Him and we have NO JOY in the things He celebrates... even then our Father in heaven wants to celebrate with His beloved children... He is the God of JOY!

All of history is moving in the direction of an eternal feast where there's food and wine but NO ADDICTIONS!...A party where we share in the heart of Abba... and enjoy full acceptance forever.

And in the meantime, He is appealing to us (both the younger-brother types and the older-brother types and... I HOPE you've come to see... WE ARE ALL, at different times...we are ALL both types! Squandering God's resources or squandering His heart)...

But what He wants for us all is to bring us in...to fill His House of Joy... with music (the word in v. 25 for music, used only once in the NT is "sum-phonia" – i.e. He pulls together all the instruments and has a tremendous, raucous, loud, beautiful explosion of music and celebration)... and He wants us all to rejoice with Him – to be happy in His presence together! "But we had to be celebrate and rejoice..."

Now we go to receive another installment...a further down-payment and a taste of things to come... The future whispers to us: "Come! Your Father accepts you and wants to convey His heart to you... eat and anticipate that a place is set for you in the House of Joy!"

There is one more character to discuss...and I plan to do that as we come to the Table together.

Let's Pray.

The Communion

What if the older brother had NOT squandered his relationship with the Father? What if he shared his Father's heart...and felt what his father felt: saw that the Father's joy was NOT complete...as he sees the Father looking on the horizon everyday?

What if the older brother couldn't stand to see his father's heart breaking day after day...until finally he said, "Dad! I have to take a little trip...I'll be a few days..."

And what if the older brother (perfectly in tune with the Father's desire to have the family complete – the whole 100 sheep and the ten coins all together) what if the older brother went after the younger brother...and like a Good Shepherd carried him home... What would that look like?

Well...we know: the religious leaders in Jesus Christ's audience were NOT being the big brothers they should've been but Jesus Christ WAS...and IS!

He goes to the Other Side...to the distant country and He finds us...He found ME! And He paid my debt with His own life and death...His Body and Blood.

He IS the fattened calf who was born to die... His whole purpose for coming was to die (just like a fattened calf has one purpose!)

And NOW both our Father and our Perfect Older brother want to impress their unified desire into OUR hearts... to give us a desire to celebrate as we receive fellow sinners... welcome them and celebrate their inclusion.

Even now Jesus Christ gives Himself to us...He becomes here, at this Table, He becomes our Food and Drink...and we get tuned to be His "sum-phonia" a symphony made up of all these wonderful and different instruments... sounding out to a tired world desperate for a New Song.

Let's pray and then receive Jesus Christ and receive the Father's Heart.