

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 4 Lent 3/31/19 Pastor Bill Uetricht

What we name things often shapes our view of those things. Forever in the church, the gospel reading that I just shared with you has been called the “parable of the prodigal son.” Such a title causes us to focus on the younger son who decides that he wants his inheritance now from his father and runs off and squanders it. This kind of view of the parable fits a lot of American religion in which there is such a great emphasis on morality and individualism.

For many Americans, religion is about behaving. The problem in the story is that the son misbehaved. The resolution is that he saw the light and turned his life around. The focus is on the individual son and his immoral behavior and his significant turn around.

I’m intrigued by Barbara Brown Taylor’s title for this story. She calls it the “parable of the dysfunctional family.” Who doesn’t know a dysfunctional family, and who doesn’t participate in one? This approach will resonate with many of us. And what’s more, it probably will enable us to see it in a less individualistic way, and not so much as a parable of sin, repentance, and redemption, a typical American slant on it.

To understand the story that Jesus tells today it becomes necessary to think as people of Jesus’ day would have thought. They would have thought not so much of the significance of individuals, but rather of families and communities. Most ancient cultures were much more communally minded than is ours. These ancient folks would have been preoccupied with shame and honor, how you and I appear to others, how we fit into the communal expectations of the culture around us.

In the story of the two sons, the younger son, in asking for his inheritance right now, is doing something quite shameful. Honestly, he is not supposed to get his inheritance until the father is dead. So in some ways, he is treating his father as if he is dead. His father is dead *to him*. That’s a dishonorable thing. What will the community think about that? And what will they think about the father’s allowing the

son to boss him around like that? What kind of father is he? Has he lost total control? After all, life is all about family. Let's face it. Family is the means by which you experience security in life. The family not only helps you make it emotionally and socially, but also, economically. We don't know this for sure, but you have to wonder if in giving the sons their inheritance the father has sold the farm. That's clearly a shameful thing. What is going on with this family? It is one dysfunctional mess.

And look what happens to the younger son after he runs away from home. He ends up feeding pigs and longing to eat the food that pigs eat. Hey Toto, we are not in Israel anymore! We are not in Jewishville anymore. Jews aren't fond of pigs; they don't, as my Old Testament professor used to say, "They don't eat ham sandwiches." We are in unclean Gentile territory. That is dishonorable. Man, this young guy is giving his family, his father, a bad name.

And this older son—you know, the one who behaved—he isn't helping much either. Or at least his father's interaction with him isn't helping. The older son pouts because his Dad is throwing his reprobate son a big party. He is so ticked off he won't come into the party. So the Father begs, pleads with the older son to get him to join the fun. What kind of family is this? The son doesn't do what his father asks him. Now I am really used to that. Our kids often don't do what we parents ask them. That's just a given. But it wasn't a given in Jesus' day. Sons did what their father told them to do. To not do so was shameful.

And therefore, there would be no begging on the part of fathers to get their sons to cooperate with them. No way! Actually, I have to say that my dad would have never begged me to do what he wanted me to do. And his Dad, dynamite Bill, who blew up things for a living, and who was a member of a local vigilante justice group, would have never pleaded with my Dad. You did what you were told to do. And that was big time in Jesus' day. What's going on when a son doesn't do he is supposed to do? And more than that, what's going on when a father stoops to the son's level and pleads? That is shameful. This is one dysfunctional family.

And if you don't believe that yet, you might just believe it when you see what the father does when the younger son comes back. The younger son, when he is eating with the pigs, comes to his senses and realizes that he could have a much better life back at home. This being knee-deep in a river of slop is getting a bit old. So he decides to go back and he proceeds to rehearse what he is going to say when he meets up with his father. He comes up with some nice, neat faux (false) confession. "Oh, I am an awful sinner. I am not worthy of being a slave in your household." Psychology sometimes works with people. Make them think that you are so regretful, even if you aren't. It's worked well with me on occasion.

So the son begins his journey back to home, and when he starts to get close to his father, the father runs up to him. What is going on? The father is running after some disrespectful son who has caused great harm to his reputation in the community? Aristotle is known for saying, "Great men don't run in public." Great men, famous men, men who matter don't run after people. People run after them. This father is a wimp. We thought we knew him. We thought he was a pillar in our community. What is up? He is a disaster of a father. This is one big dysfunctional family, and the father is at the center of the dysfunctionality.

Barbara Brown Taylor is right in calling this the parable of the dysfunctional family. But I have heard other names for this parable that are probably worth our while considering, worth our while tapping for the wisdom that flows from them. Two of my favorites are "the parable of the prodigal father," and, as Kari Henkelmann Keyl titles it, "the parable of the loony dad."

We are so used to seeing this story as an indictment of an individual who misbehaved, creating for ourselves a good narrative about how you or I or our kids shouldn't misbehave. But what if the focus in the story really isn't the misbehaving son, the son who spends wildly, who wastes his inheritance in wild living? And by the way, the story never tells us that the son wasted his money on prostitutes. That

was the spin that the older brother placed on his younger son's tale. You know how brothers are. They have to blow up the fault of the other so that they look good in front of the parent. John Petty says that the older son in adding the prostitute portion of the story must be "tapping into his own fantasy life."

This story isn't really about the naughty son. It's about the prodigal father, who is wasteful with his grace and forgiveness. This father is prodigal, that is, extravagant, in his dealing with everybody, the ones who are naughty and the ones who behave. This is a loony dad. This is a dad who abandons the honor and shame preoccupation. This is a dad who doesn't keep score. This is a dad who will do just about anything to reconnect to his children. This is a dad who is loony about love.

For this dad, call him God, life is fundamentally about reconciliation. Did you notice that when the misbehaving son starts his speech of confession to his father that the father interrupts him, not paying much attention to the speech, but rather calling for a party. The father wasn't interested in listening to the son's long, drawn-out, manipulative, Oh-ain't-it-awful speech. What he cares about is that his son is home. What he cares about is that reconciliation is occurring.

Paul, in our second reading for today, tells his opponents and us that the heart of the Jesus message, the heart of the story of his crucifixion is reconciliation. That is what this thing called the Christian faith is all about. It isn't so much about behaving or believing the right things. It is about a God who is the business of reconciling, who lets go even of his honor so that reconciliation might occur. It is a loony God we speak of today. Our God is way over the top in love, grace, and forgiveness, way over the top, Paul would have us know, in reconciling all things and all people to himself.

And Paul says today that this looney reconciliation stuff is what our lives, what our ministries are to be all about. God has entrusted to *us* the ministry of reconciliation. And in a world that currently thrives on dividing people—white people from black people, Americans from

foreigners, Republicans from Democrats, Socialists from Capitalists, gay people from straight people, rich people from poor people, Christians from Muslims, old people from young people—in such a world, this message is so vital.

It is time for us to get a little loony. It's time for us to become over the top, prodigal, extravagant with love, grace, and forgiveness so that reconciliation reigns!