

A Kiss of Peace

Luke 15:11b-32

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Lent 4

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’

²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’” (NRSV)

I

We already know what this parable means, right? We say this parable is about a foolish son who grabs his inheritance early, then wastes the money on prostitutes and other stupid expenses. The “prodigal” son, we call him, even though that word *prodigal* is not in Luke’s text. “Prodigal” because he’s wasteful and extravagant, because he makes lavish purchases and lives for a while in luxury. We shake our thrifty Mennonite heads and say, “Tsk, tsk! What an idiot! How could he blow his inheritance like that? If he had just invested his capital wisely, he could have reaped a good income for the rest of his life. If only he had been more prudent!” And then there were those prostitutes he paid for his own sexual pleasure. What a moral degenerate that prodigal son is!

However, there's one small problem with this line of interpretation: it's probably not the interpretation most people in the first century would have had.

II

Let's start with the prostitutes. Prostitutes are mentioned only once in this parable, in verse 30, when the older brother scornfully tells dad that the younger son "has devoured your property with prostitutes." But when we look at the story carefully, it's obvious this is an unfounded accusation, hurled in the heat of the moment. Nowhere else does the story say the younger son visited prostitutes. The older son wasn't there in the far-off country to see how his brother spent the money. Besides, the older son has just returned to the village from working out in the fields—he's not been back in the village long enough to hear details of how younger brother spent the money. This accusation about prostitutes is probably a fiction the older brother invents to make his younger brother look terrible.

The other problem is that we often read this parable through capitalist lenses. We turn the younger son into a foolish investor who doesn't manage his money well. That grates on us Mennonites, because for centuries we've been good business people. We're thrifty and make smart capital investments that have paid us good profits. We look down our long noses at this young man for being such a rotten businessman.

It's not likely that people in the first century would have understood the story this way. Sure, they thought about economic issues, but when they heard this story economic issues probably were not the first thing on their minds. Instead, their attention probably focused on family dynamics in this story. So let's see what happens if we think about the family dynamics of this parable.

III

In first century Mediterranean culture, the most important unit in society was the group, not the individual. We Westerners usually think just the opposite—that the individual is more important than the group. Take a simple example like school uniforms.

Having children wear uniforms to school might be a good thing. Some evidence suggests that when children wear uniforms to school, bullying and other violence drops, academic performance rises (because children no longer worry about what other students are wearing), and intruders are easy to recognize (because students are dressed alike). But many Americans object to uniforms because they inhibit individuality and curtail free expression. We place a high value on letting kids choose the clothes they want to wear.¹ We want individuals to stand out, to be different.

Not so in the first century. In the world of the New Testament, the most important entity was the group, such as the family, the village, the tribe, or the clan. Your identity as a person came from belonging to one of these clearly defined groups, especially your family. You were who you were because of who your family was. You really did not have much of an identity outside of your family. So one of your main jobs in life was to be loyal to other members of your family, to fulfill your duty and obligation toward them, and to avoid doing anything that would bring shame on their heads. When you wanted to make a decision, you deferred to the wiser judgment of your parents, your uncles and aunts, and your grandparents. In that time and place, conformity was a virtue. The honorable, upright person conformed to the ways of his or her family, clan, village, and tribe. It was considered immoral to leave your family or to cut the cords binding you to them. Acting as an individualist brought shame on you and your family.

IV

With this information in mind, perhaps we can imagine how first century people might have reacted to this parable of the father and his two sons. Their attention would have immediately focused on family dynamics—and they would have been shocked at the nearly unthinkable scenario of a son demanding his inheritance while dad was still alive, then selling off the family's assets, and finally abandoning his family, his country, and his faith. Let's take those three things in order.

First, the younger son brought shame on his father and himself by asking for his inheritance while his father was still living. This was considered an insult. In that cultural

setting, asking for your inheritance while your father was still alive was equivalent to wishing he were dead. In effect, the younger son is saying something like: “Dad, I wish you were dead so I could get my share of the land. But you’re still alive and I want my inheritance now. Can I have it?” Even to our ears, this request sounds shocking. I, for instance, would never dream of doing such a thing with my own father.

Second, the younger son apparently sells off his share of the family’s assets. The details of the story infer that this is a relatively rich family. Dad owns a fine robe and signet ring (v. 22), a fatted calf (v. 23), fields (v. 25), and has some combination of hired workers and slaves (vv. 19, 22, 26). Most wealth in those days was tied up in land and farm animals—which you can’t carry with you to a far-off country. So we can guess that when the younger son received his inheritance, he sold his share of the land and his share of the cattle for cash, and then left town. Both land and animals are capital investments you can use to produce crops and more animals. So consider the long-term implications of this: by selling off some his family’s capital, he’s reduced the size of his family’s wealth. He has put himself ahead of his family. By selling family assets he has shamed his family.

Third, the younger son abandons his family, his heritage, and his faith. He goes off to “a distant country” (v. 13) to live alone. Phones, email, IM, and texting did not exist, so there was no way for him and his family to communicate. He was no longer embedded in his family or had a relationship with them. Then too, he ends up living with pigs—unclean animals that good Jews had nothing to do with—which indicates he’s forsaken his religious heritage and faith. In a culture where people were supposed to honor their parents, maintain their clan’s wealth, and stay closely connected to their family, this son flagrantly dishonored his family and himself. This was despicable behavior.

V

One day while sitting with the pigs, when things got about as bad as they can possibly get, the younger son said to himself: “I will get up and go to my father. . . .” It’s a daring, gutsy move, because that son had no justification for thinking he still had a father. By the cultural standards of the day, he had dissed and disowned his father. He had no

right to go back, no right to call that person his father. But he was desperate. It was his last hope.

He shuffles back to his home village, barefoot, his clothes tattered, his reputation totally trashed, a young man so dishonored that people in his home village would probably all turn their backs to him.

Then something happened that no first century Mediterranean father would ever do: dad lifted his robes and ran down the village street to hug, to kiss, this young man. In this act, the father communicated to the rest of the village that he accepted his son and that the village should do so too. The father symbolically threw a mantle of protection around his son. Dad behaved outrageously, as a Mediterranean mother might have behaved.²

As I said, no Mediterranean father would behave this way. Which means that Jesus isn't talking about a typical father. Jesus is really talking about God. About a God who behaves like a mother and gives shameful children a place back in the family. About God, who runs to meet us, who hugs us, and who gives us a kiss of peace.

Notes

¹ For this illustration and a larger discussion of collectivist and individualist cultures, see E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2012), chapter 4: "Captain of My Soul: Individualism and Collectivism." I thank Rick Hostetter for recommending this book to me.

² The main lines of interpretation for this parable come from Kenneth E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 109-162. I thank Joe and Linda Liechty for kindly giving me this intriguing book.