

## ***The Parable of the Disgraced Father***

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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*All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

*Jesus told them this parable:*

*"A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the inheritance.' Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.*

*"When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough food, but I'm starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.'" ' So he got up and went to his father.*

*"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.*

*"Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant replied, 'Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.' Then the older son was furious and didn't want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. He answered his father, 'Look, I've served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you've never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.' Then his father said, 'Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.'"*

*(Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32, Common English Bible)*

For most of my life,

I have heard stories about the first house that my parents lived in.

It was known to them and their neighbors as The Mengises.

Mengis was the last name of the first owners of this house.

So, in that rural community in Wayne County, Ohio

the Schlonegers lived at the Mengises.

When my parents and two older brothers told stories about this house,  
they always laughed when they called it The Mengises.  
Growing up, I pictured the house in my mind –  
I thought it was a rental, ranch style, white, with a circular drive surrounded by trees.  
I don't know why, but that's just how I imagined it.  
I didn't actually know The Mengises.  
In my mind, this house was a part of all those fuzzy years before color television,  
the era that history knows as Before Mark.  
Unlike my brothers, I had no personal memories.  
That house was a part of their story, not mine.

It doesn't matter whether you are talking about a house or a story --  
if you never belonged in it, if you can't place yourself inside it,  
then you've never truly known it.

Jesus was healing with miracles,  
he was teaching with authority,  
and the tax collectors and sinners were drawing close to him.  
Jesus welcomed them, he ate with them.  
The Pharisees and the scribes, they grumbled about this.

To the scribes and the Pharisees,  
the sinners and the tax collectors had no place in the story of God and God's people.  
That story did not include such as these.  
They couldn't be inside the house.  
They couldn't be in the story.

But sometimes the stories we tell  
are ones that we never truly understood.  
And we never understood them  
because we never identified ourselves in them.  
Sometimes, the stories we tell,  
the ones we know oh-so-well,  
must be retold by another  
so that we can find our way inside them,  
so that we can recognize our place,  
so that we can finally come home.  
This is one reason why Jesus told new stories, I think,  
because the old ones were never truly understood.

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them,"  
the Pharisees grumbled.  
So Jesus told them a parable,  
and what follows are three stories,  
three stories that Luke understood as one, one parable.  
The three-in-one.

A shepherd leaves behind his flock to pursue one lost sheep.  
A woman searches the entire house to pursue one lost coin.

Jesus is the good shepherd, Jesus is the searching woman.  
Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them,  
for God searches for the lost to restore them to their proper place.

Jesus then goes on to tell them a third story,  
a longer story, a deeper story.  
We call this story the Parable of the Prodigal Son,  
but I think they would have been more likely to call it the Parable of the Disgraced Father.  
That's because the family in Jesus' story  
didn't respect the rules, they didn't uphold the values, they didn't follow the conventions  
about honor, and land, and family, and community.  
The actions in this family were so shocking, so disturbing,  
that they threatened everyone's innate sense  
of what is good, what is right, what is justice,  
what is honorable, what is faithful, what is loving.

This was a story that threatened the story they told,  
the one that they thought they knew,  
the one where they knew their place.

Jesus said, "There was a man, who had two sons. . ."  
and the younger son requested his inheritance while his father was alive, in good health.  
In traditional Middle Eastern culture, this meant,  
"Father, I can't wait for you to die,  
for I want to receive right now your worth to me."  
To the son, his father was nothing but a commodity to be exploited.  
And in the face of such disrespect,  
an honorable father could be expected to strike his son on the cheek,  
to drive him from the house, to teach him a lesson that he wouldn't forget.

But this was a father  
who was not made in the image of what everyone understood  
to be a good, honorable human father.  
No, *this* father in *this* story granted the request.  
He took the blow to his honor.  
He took the shame upon himself.  
Then he turned his other cheek,  
and divided his estate completely.  
He included his second son in the early inheritance.

With no other cheeks to offer,  
this father proceeded to take blows to the body.  
For the younger son "gathered all he had,"  
which means that he cashed out his part of the farm  
even while his father was still farming it.  
It was just another commodity to be exploited.  
This was not only bad behavior,  
this was against the law.  
While unusual, first century Jewish law provided for early inheritance,

but it did not grant the children the right to sell until after the father's death.  
But this son, this young son, this prodigal son,  
he did not care for his family,  
he did not care for his community,  
he did not care for the law.  
He saw them all as chips to cash in.  
His pockets bulging with his family's honor, land, and legacy,  
the young son went off to a foreign country,  
and he blew it all on candy.

Jesus' listeners would have known that this was an outrage  
that could not go unpunished.  
And if the disgraced father would not take action,  
the good people of the community must.  
At that time, there was a special ceremony  
specially reserved for Jewish boys  
who disgraced their people  
by losing their inheritance to Gentile pagans.  
It was called a *qetsatsah*.<sup>1</sup>  
To hold a qetsatsah, the villagers would bring a large earthen jar,  
and they would fill it with burned nuts and burned corn.  
Then they would break it in front of these prodigal sons,  
and they would shout their names out loud,  
declaring them cut off from their people,  
shunned for a life on their own, alone.  
This was what a son like the one in Jesus' story would face upon his return,  
for this is what a son like that deserved,  
for shaming his family, for shaming his father, for shaming his people.

Surely, the youngest son, the Prodigal Son, knew that he could never go home?  
Surely, he knew this ceremony  
would be waiting upon his return.  
But, Jesus went on to say,  
this son was dying of hunger  
and had ran out of options.

The one who had treated his father, his family, his future  
as commodities to cash in,  
now had become a commodity for others.  
Like the Israelite slaves before him,  
his life was valued only for his work,  
offered to support the honor and the well-being and the pleasure  
of pagans and their pigs.  
So the son hatched a plan to solve his problem.  
He would return to his father,

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, "The Pursuing Father (Part 1)," *John Mark Ministries*  
[<http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/2396.htm>].

he would confess his wrongdoing,  
he would accept the *qetsatsah*,  
he would work as a servant.

The shunning, the ban.  
was waiting as he started off down the road.

But the father, like the good shepherd searching for the lost sheep,  
like the woman searching for the lost coin,  
was searching off in the horizon for his lost son.  
And off in the horizon, his son appeared.  
And what once was a story of trivial pursuits  
now becomes a tale of an amazing race.  
The father must reach the boy before the boy reaches the village.  
The father must throw a banquet of reconciliation  
before the village throws a *qetsatsah* of shunning.

And without regard to the concepts of honor and decorum and propriety,  
recklessly throwing all caution to the wind,  
the father ran like the wind.  
“Great men never run in public,” Aristotle said.  
It was humiliating, it was shameful.

But this father is unlike other fathers.  
This father will take the shame to restore the child.  
And before the son could finish the words that he rehearsed,  
this father not only welcomed him,  
he hugged him, he kissed him,  
he gave him a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet,  
he threw him a banquet to celebrate.  
Out of his compassion,  
the disgraced father took the form of a servant,  
reconciling his son to himself.

Since the son had been restored to the family so quickly,  
the community chose to join the father’s banquet of reconciliation as guests  
rather than throwing the *qetsatsah* of shunning as hosts.  
But this banquet was given at a great price --  
it cost the father just as much as his son’s betrayal.  
He paid for this banquet with his honor, with his standing, with his power.  
Yes, his son had been found, but the father was a disgrace.

Of course, you know that this isn’t the end of the story.  
The father still had not paid the full cost for his reckless love,  
he still had shame he must yet endure.  
His son, his oldest son, the one whose role was to greet visitors to the house, refused to participate.  
He remained outside the house.  
He would not enter the story being told inside.  
This was an unspeakable insult to his father’s honor.

Culturally, a father could be expected to ignore the insult,  
and to attend to the stubborn son later.

But this was not an ordinary father.  
Sighing the sigh of a love that hurts, that costs,  
the father humbled himself, taking the form of a slave,  
and left the banquet.  
Only this time, he offered his love, his banquet,  
to the lawkeeper rather than the lawbreaker.<sup>2</sup>

And that's where the story ends,  
with the father's invitation to the lawkeeper to come on in.  
The scribes and the Pharisees, they were left hanging.  
We are left hanging.  
What will the older son do?  
Will he come inside, to the banquet of reconciliation?  
Or will he stay outside the house,  
secure in the story that he tells  
of honor and shame, right and wrong, who's in and who's out?

A few years ago, when my side of our family got together at Christmas,  
I found out that the Mengises was not the house that I had imagined.  
It was not the white, ranch rental, with the circular drive, surrounded by trees.  
After hearing another reference to the Mengises,  
I asked why there were no pictures of The Mengises.  
It was then, only then, that I found out that there was no other house  
that my parents and two brothers lived in before I was born.  
When my parents and brothers talked about The Mengises,  
they were talking about the yellow house that I lived in until I was seven years old --  
the one with the treehouse out back,  
the big lawn, the red barn, the basketball hoop in front.  
I know that house. I lived in that house.  
I just didn't know *that* was the house that was called The Mengises.  
I was always a part of that story,  
but, for most of my life,  
I couldn't locate myself in it.

Sometimes, the stories we tell are ones that we never truly understood.  
And we never understood them  
because we never identified ourselves in them.  
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the ones we know oh-so-well,  
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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, "The Pursuing Father (Part 2)," *John Mark Ministries*  
<http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/2397.htm>

This is why Jesus told new stories, I think,  
because the old one was never truly understood.

A shepherd leaves behind his flock to pursue one lost sheep.  
A woman searches the entire house to pursue one lost coin.  
A father scans the horizon and then runs to pursue one lost son.  
This story is your story.  
After all, this house was your home all along.

But the question is, do we recognize ourselves in this story?  
Do we see ourselves as needing God's grace?  
Will we celebrate and offer this same grace to our brothers and sisters?

The older brother stands outside the house.  
Will he go in?

I don't know . . .  
will you?