

**“Good News in the Messiness of Life”**

**Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

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Quite often I have heard people talk about wanting to emulate the early church and had to wonder if they knew what they were saying. There was no early church. There were early churches, each with a long list of distinctive qualities, and they all had strengths and weaknesses.

The churches in Galatia were too rigid in their thinking while the church in Corinth was out of control. The church in Rome needed to rely on grace more, or else Paul would not have talked about it so much, while the church in Philippi, Paul’s favorite in many ways, struggled with a group of legalists. The book of Revelation includes letters to seven churches which merit praise but also deserve harsh criticism.

We have much to be grateful for in these early churches and much we can learn from them. They persevered through great suffering, they carried the faith forward and they charted the way for us. But they were not perfect. They had their failings, just as we do. So, we can learn from their mistakes just as much as we can from their faithfulness.

In like manner, quite often I have heard people talk about a desire to emulate the biblical family and had to wonder if they had ever read the Bible. In the very first biblical family, one of the sons killed the other one. The Patriarchs had multiple wives, mistresses and slave women. And among the finest of biblical families, there were multiple instances of rape, incest, abuse, abandonment and outright meanness.

There was love too and somehow these families stuck together for the most part and helped pass along the faith. But they were not perfect and they took many different shapes and sizes, which is to say they did not even remotely resemble the Cleavers.

In fact, even the family Jesus describes in the familiar parable we have read today seems like a bit of a mess. It looks like a nuclear family, though no mother is referenced, partly because this parable is not just about family life. It’s told in response to the Pharisees’ criticism of

Jesus' habit of hanging around sinners. So, this is a story about the place of sinners in the covenant community. Are they welcome or not?

But the narrative structure of the parable involves a family and in it one son runs off to Vegas and blows his inheritance, the other son stays home but only out of a sense of obligation which makes him bitter, and the father seems codependent with both sons' dysfunctions. As Deputy Marshall Samuel Gerard says in the film "The Fugitive" when he arrives at the scene of a train wreck, "My, my, my, what a mess."

And yet, this is good news for us, not because we look good by comparison, but because we look just like these early churches and biblical families. The fact that we are a muddled mess doesn't mean we are unworthy of God's love. It means we are human and human people are the only ones God has to work with; human people are the ones God extends grace to; human people are the ones Jesus dies for on a cross.

Some of us identify more with the prodigal son while others identify with the elder brother, and some may identify with the father, in being God-like with our grace or overindulgent of disobedience. And we may identify with different characters at different places of life. One scholar has observed that reading a familiar parable is like stepping into a river, and as Heraclitus of Ephesus once noted, we cannot step into the same river twice. It is always moving. It is never the same. Nor are we.

But we identify with one of these characters and we have family members who are like the others. Several times over the years someone has noted that I seem to have a particular sensitivity to people with struggles and thus, they assume that I must have had a good bit of training and experience working with difficult issues, and I have... But I always hasten to say that I have experienced almost every kind of messy reality in my own extended family – addiction, incarceration, suicide, bipolar disorders, an aunt holding a butcher's knife at my throat one Thanksgiving when she discovered that her oldest son and I were going to have her committed for in-house treatment... Once we got the knife out of her hand, we did thank her for confirming our diagnosis.

You may be wondering now if the search committee knew all of this about my family, but this is your family too. Not all the details are

exactly the same, but all of our families are a complex mixture of qualities, as each of us is a complex mixture. We don't talk about it, we may cover up every wart and blemish, but this isn't honest and it doesn't help us. We don't need to reveal every sordid detail, but being honest about our struggles is healthy and helpful. It helps us to let out feelings we have kept in, and it helps others to know they are not alone.

It is tragic to read obituaries of people who have died too young, and some tragedies come by natural causes or accident, but some do not. Too many in this day come as a result of addiction or suicide or both due to the pressure we put on young people, the prevalence of substances and the relative scarcity of helpful resources. Usually the issues are covered up, but every now and then, a family discloses something that points to the truth; again, not every detail, but enough to point to the struggle. It is a courageous thing to do, a wonderful gift to other families who are struggling, and a helpful cue for our society. The first step in addressing any problem is a willingness to name our demons.

Biblical texts help us with this task because they are honest about the human condition. The prodigal son is a mess, just like the sinners Jesus hangs out with, much to the Pharisees' consternation, but so is the elder brother in his own way which may represent the Pharisaical approach to life. Yet in the end, all of these messy people are still loved by God. That is good news for us as individuals and as families.

And it is good news for the church. For like families, the church is a complex mixture of many different qualities and conditions. In his book *Practice Resurrection* Eugene Peterson put it this way (p. 27).

I would be a witness to the Holy Spirit's formation of congregation out of this mixed bag of humanity that is my congregation – broken, hobbled, crippled, sexually abused and spiritually abused, emotionally unstable, passive and passive-aggressive, neurotic men and women. Men at fifty who have failed a dozen times and know they will never amount to anything. Women who have been ignored and scorned and abused in a marriage in which they have been faithful. People living with children and spouses deep in addiction. Lepers and blind and deaf and dumb sinners. Also

fresh converts, excited to be in on this new life. Spirited young people, energetic and easier to be guided into a life of love and compassion, mission and evangelism. A few seasoned saints who know how to pray and endure. And a considerable number of people who pretty much just show up. I wonder why they bother. There they are. The hot, the cold, and the lukewarm, Christians, half-Christians, almost Christians. New-agers, angry ex-Catholics, sweet new converts. I didn't choose them. I don't *get* to choose...

Indeed, this is the church - a diverse community of people none of us chooses, people God chooses to love, like the father in Jesus' parable. And no matter how odd it may seem that God would welcome any one particular person here, the fact that God does is good news for us because it means that we too are welcome.

And yet, the good news of this story is not just connected to its honest assessment of the human condition. It is also connected to its description of a path toward healing and wholeness. Part of this path involves what the prodigal son does. The text says he comes to himself or in other translations – he comes to his senses (v. 17). He only does this because he runs out of his money and hits rock bottom, so much so that he envies the pods the pigs are eating - not exactly fine cuisine for anyone but an abomination for a faithful Jew!

But once he hits rock bottom, he starts taking steps toward healing. He decides to return home and beg his father's forgiveness. He rehearses a speech and resigns himself to living as a hired hand if necessary. We know that doesn't happen. He doesn't even get to finish his speech; his father is so overjoyed to see him. But for his part, after having done so much wrong, he now does everything right. He does a complete about-face. He repents in all the ways we explored last week, and as a result, he reconciles with his father and knows great joy.

The message for us is that while life can be messy, we can choose healing. It just takes initiative, a willingness to change, and often this willingness comes when we hit rock bottom. It would be less traumatic if we could learn sooner, and sometimes we do, but often we have to hit

rock bottom, and this means that sometimes we have to allow people we love to hit rock bottom. It is difficult when we are the one who has to let a loved one go his/her own way, travel to the distant country and squander life. But sometimes it is the only way to healing and hope.

In another setting where I served, we had an older woman in our church who had been codependent with an alcoholic daughter for many years. The daughter had trouble, never addressed her issues, and thus lived with her mother in a poor part of town, continued her substance abuse, and lived off of her mother's resources until they ran out. We would get an occasional call from a neighbor wondering why we didn't help this poor woman. They didn't even have air conditioning! We would patiently explain that we had helped them for decades, bought many window units and other things, but the daughter always sold whatever we bought and used the money to feed her habit.

It was a sad story and it had gone on for a long time. The woman was 84 when I left that setting; that is the daughter was 84. The mother was 104. She had been "caring" for this daughter for over 50 years! It is hard to let anyone we love hit rock bottom, but sometimes it is the best path available. It can lead to healing. Rarely does codependency help. It's like hoping to win the lottery without ever buying a ticket.

So, once he hits rock bottom, the prodigal takes the initiative to change his life, but this is not the whole story. The path toward healing and wholeness is not just linked to what the prodigal does. It is also linked to what the father does. When he sees the prodigal coming, he goes out to meet him. He extends compassion, hugs and kisses him. He is too overjoyed to worry about anything else. The prodigal begins his confession, indicating that he has changed his ways - so maybe the father isn't codependent - but the father doesn't let him finish. He welcomes him home as a beloved son and throws a party for him.

If we view the father to be God, the message is all about grace, the way God welcomes each of us home no matter how far we have gone astray. That's an image that squares with the whole of the Gospel and with what we experience in Christ. But if we view the father as a human being, then the message for us is that we need to retain an openness to reconciliation, a willingness to welcome back those who have gone

astray or betrayed us, assuming they have made changes in their lives. The father takes as much initiative as the son, and so must we.

When we experience conflict, whether in our families or in the church or anywhere else, we always seem to expect the other person to take the first step toward healing. The trouble is the other person expects us to take the first step. So, no one moves. In this story, both parties take initiative. There is hope in this model.

Yet the story does not end here, with healing for all. Someone is missing from the party – the elder brother. The father tries to welcome him, but he turns away; he is so angry that Dad has welcomed his punk-brother back while he has kept the family business going that he wants to cuss! This tension is never resolved. It is an unfinished piece of the puzzle which adds yet another touch of realism to the story. Life is an endless process of struggle, healing and more struggle.

Some of you know that we reconnected with my biological father's family almost 20 years ago. My parents divorced when I was eight months old. I never knew my father, but I knew love in my family, my mother remarried when I was six, and I never felt a strong need to reconnect. But I married someone wiser than me and one day she convinced me that we should try to find my father. As it turned out, he had died the year before. We had been living 30 miles apart. There was sadness at having waited too long, but then I met three cousins who were more like me than anyone I knew. One has become like a sister. I performed her daughter's wedding. It has been an indescribable joy!

Yet, at the same time, I experienced alienation from my father of nurture for reasons I will not describe here. It's like living in adjoining rooms at a motel. I have left my door open, but his is closed and locked.

But this is life. There is conflict, separation and alienation. There is healing, reconciliation and peace. And then, there is more conflict. The prodigal comes home and the elder brother goes off to pout. Will the human family ever come together completely? Perhaps, in God's grace, perhaps. The door is always open, the arms of love are always extended. And we are invited not just to walk into them, but to extend our arms to each other again and again and again.