

At the memorial service for Patsie Jacobs a couple days ago, we were all reminded of the joy of families, the generations learning from each other and passing along traditions; how families can welcome in those with no family and stand in the place of actual blood relatives with warmth and love. We never know who we touch, do we? Here were about 30 family members, then friends, all gathered to remember with thanksgiving a person they had in common, who had touched them all in different ways.

At major life events, families hopefully come together and support each other. If we live long enough we realize that families also usually have some messiness going on, too. That was something that shocked me when I was a new minister. I knew that my OWN family had its messiness, but I thought everyone else had perfect families. Maybe it's by virtue of being a pastor that we get called on to minister to crisis situations and troubled times – I just remember looking out at that congregation and thinking how many of them had difficulties going on, even some downright messiness. Where were June and Ward, or Wallie & the Beav, with all kinds of situations wrapped up with wise words or cookies?

Jesus was wise to what kinds of things go on in real life, and told some very pointed stories about real situations. Someone once said that the best fiction involves things that might not have actually happened, but surely could have. Even our messiness is not really unique to us – other folks have walked similar paths before us – and will walk them after us as well. Jesus was good at taking these common messes of life and making observations about God's kingdom through them.

Take the parable we read today. Various commentators suggested alternate titles for this parable of Jesus' best known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son:

- The Parable of the Prodigal Father, in reference to how he was expansive and generous with his love and wealth.
- The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family, seeing all the sibling fuss that we unfortunately recognize, and the Good Son/Bad Son dynamic that is a theme of so many novels and films.

-The Parable of the Lost Sons, recognizing that both are in danger of being lost to the family if the father hadn't acted for them, and recognizing that both sons are emphasized in the story.

These are very rich stories, full of ways for us to get into it and let the Holy Spirit speak to us of the work we still need to do as we are continuously being transformed into the image of Christ. Jesus was great in telling parables that can be heard by so many people in so many ways, and that told the deepest truths about faith and life.

Both of the New Testament texts are addressed to messy life situations, which unfortunately, we can't avoid, being human beings. In 2 Corinthians, Paul was writing to a troubled Gentile church in Corinth that was doubting him a bit, and being attracted to more glossy speakers who told them more what was easy on the ears. He had to talk pretty firmly in some places, and remind them that, being in Christ, they now saw things differently than before they were in Christ.

Jesus tells the parable of the 2 sons and their father in response to a mess in the religious family - the religious folks of his day were criticizing him for befriending the wrong types - sinners, for example, who didn't follow the law well; and the hated tax collectors, other Jews who played on the side of the Roman conquerors and helped tax their own kin, with a reputation of being cheaters as well.

Jesus takes our expectations of who's the good son and the bad son, and really mixes it up. Mostly I've heard this parable preached with the son who runs away and spends his inheritance as the bad son. That's probably the first level of approach here, and many folks need that message - that God will run to welcome those who have made a lot of bad decisions and suffered for it, who, hit bottom like he did sitting with the ceremonially and religiously unclean pigs and eating their slop and who finally "come to themselves" like the son did and just start that journey home. It's a freeing and grace-filled picture of forgiveness, of unconditional love, of a welcome that can help a person turn themselves around and have their life transformed. Many folks seem to need to bottom out that way before they'll give an ear to the love of God and the call of God - even folks raised in church sometimes. It's a mystery to me why some people take one path and other folks another; for folks who identify with that younger son, the good news is how his father runs, RUNS, to him in welcome, and rejoices over his return with no recriminations or conditions.

The elder son starts out by looking like the good son – he’s accepted the mores of the family and community, evidently followed the law, honored his father, stayed on the ancestral ground, protected what was the family’s. Something I learned in my sermon study was how it was considered a special level of bad to lose your inheritance to a Gentile – there was actually a ceremony to cast out a person who did this. The elder son is the epitome of the good son, the faithful son, the loyal son, the son who didn’t dishonor his father. Yet about the same # verses are devoted to this elder son, and it isn’t resolved at the end, either – does he ever relent and come in to his father’s feast? No one asked him if he forgave his brother who lost half the family fortune and disgraced their father; he just sees his profligate younger brother seeming to be better loved, and not being made to make amends, or punished or anything. So although this older son has made the “good” decisions, he is now self-righteous, aloof, judgmental, punitive, and unforgiving – and won’t celebrate.

So who’s the good son, really? In the story, it doesn’t really matter – God, pictured here as the father of both sons, wants them both at the table in the deepest way, and is willing to even make a spectacle of himself to restore the broken fellowship. He has no pride – he runs, he weeps, he welcomes, he urges – whatever it takes. He doesn’t care about appearances – he takes it on to resolve the mess.

According to the context Luke sets this in, this parable is a critique of the religious establishment who thinks well of itself and scorns those it relegates to the status of ‘sinner.’ We make a major interpretive error if we think this is just a judgment against the Jewish people of that day. Some of our faith ancestors have done that, unfortunately, because Jesus is here criticizing the Pharisees and all – but actually Jesus is criticizing the religious establishment of any era, including ours, for our tendency to look down on folks who haven’t lived according to our expectations. Most of us in church on Sundays are probably more like the older son than the younger, although there might be exceptions here and there. Many of us were raised to be a certain way and we’ve abided by it, accepted it, acted right, made the “right” decisions, made good career moves, embraced the values of the church, and think we’re pretty good. Like the unnamed Rich Young Ruler, we can say, “all these commandments we have kept since our youth.” And unless God has begun to humble us and break our hearts, we may not realize the depth of our need for

forgiveness - as well as our own non-comprehension of God's grace to all. Our sins are more hidden, more subtle, perhaps. Sins of arrogance and pride, for example –hubris, in the fancy vocabulary ; sins of not thinking of the good of our employees and neighbors, for example; sins perhaps of omission rather than commission; sins of thinking we deserve what we have and a tendency to withhold it for ourselves since we “earned” it. Sins of holding on to self-righteous anger because obviously we're “right.” We may have learned to act p-c, but that doesn't mean our hearts are changed. And it shows up when we resent the forgiveness God extends to everyone equally.

This morning, hear the voice of God calling us all to the table, to the party, the feast. Don't stay away for artificial reasons like for pride, or like thinking we've been too bad. The feast is prepared, God our host longs for us to come. Let God welcome us, no matter what. Experience God's graciousness and then extend it to others. This is the heart of the gospel, and the reality of the kingdom. AMEN.