

Family Broken

A sermon on Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 by Nathan Nettleton, 31 March 2019

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Message

If you set yourself against the other, you also cut yourself off from the Father who loves you both. You diminish yourself, cut off the other, and break the Father's heart.

Sermon

The parable of the prodigal son
The waiting father, the older brother, the fatted calf
Is it one parable?
Is it several parables?
Or is it a snapshot of the complexity of life?
The way things are, in all their painful confusion?
The way things are, seen from several perspectives?

The perspective of the fatted calf might make an interesting sermon
But maybe we'll leave that one alone
Not very vegan friendly!

Let's begin where Jesus begins
The perspective of the younger son
In Jesus's world it had to be a son
Daughters didn't usually inherit property
So the story wouldn't have made sense

But in our world this could just as easily be the prodigal daughter
So come with me
be you a daughter or a son
and imagine your way into the story
as the prodigal child

You're all grown up now
Your well-behaved life in the family business feels stifling
The bright lights are beckoning
Independence, opportunity, adventure
They all lie out there somewhere
Somewhere else
Not here where everything stays the same as it ever was

With nothing but dreary years lying ahead of you,
you just can't wait
You're impatient for life
Not this.
Life!

So you go to your father
Your dependable old, boringly-devoted-to-family, dad

And you tell him you want out
You need to move on
Spread your wings
Make your mark
Live your own life

You ask for your inheritance now
Yes, you know it would grow bigger if you wait
But you can't wait
The time is now

So with a sad shrug of his shoulders
and tears in his eye
Your father gives in and agrees
He calls the family accountant to calculate your share
and signs it over
He calls the family lawyer to update his will
Your insufferably boring older sibling
will be sole beneficiary of all that remains
And you're off

Let's cut to the perspective of the father for a minute
We need to
because if we don't
we won't understand this story
Because for those listening to Jesus,
this story is already ridiculous
In his culture
and in many cultures today
where family honour
and avoiding shame
mean everything
this story already makes no sense
No father could possibly agree to this
Ever

Here is your beloved younger child
shunning you and all you have worked for
Asking you to divide up the property and hand it over
And say goodbye
It's like asking you to cut out half of your heart
and hand it over

This is a grievous insult to the family
This is wishing you dead
This is outrageous rebellion against you
Spitting in your face in public would be more tolerable
This is so unthinkable that the law of the day
prescribed death by stoning as a fitting punishment

But this impetuous youth truly is half of your heart
Punishment doesn't even occur to you
But oh how this hurts
Not just hurts
Humiliates
This will brand you as a failed parent
Saying goodbye to your child and your property breaks your heart
"This is my heart, my life
Broken for you"

Grief and shame feel like they could overwhelm you
Yes, you still have another child
But your family is now broken
Probably forever
And everyone you know thinks you're an old fool

Now imagine yourself back into being the prodigal child
And fast forward a few years

You're in trouble now
The life of a cashed-up backpacker was a blast
Unsustainable though
The money's gone
Unskilled labouring as an undocumented immigrant
proves to be way worse than the boring family business
You're pretty much homeless
Living hand to mouth

What to do?
You'd give anything to turn back the clock
To unburn your bridges
To have a family and a home again
To have a place where you belong

But bridges don't unburn, do they?
Your father humiliated himself in letting you go
You as good as told him he was dead to you
People would despise him if he took you back
You can hardly ask him to do that to himself
Not again

But this is hell
Surely this is hell
Cut off from all love, all belonging, all hope
With a memory of home tormenting you
A hell so much of your own making
that the stark justice of it mocks you to your face

The most junior unskilled labourer in your father's business
is living more comfortably than you're living now
They've got a kindly boss
a stable job
and board and lodging provided

A plan takes shape in your mind
You'll make your way back home
Turn up one day
Offer a grovelling apology
Ask to be taken on as a junior labourer
A bottom rung wage slave
You know you can never be part of the family again
But if you can live in its shadow
And contribute your labour
That will be enough
More than you deserve perhaps
But enough to rebuild something from the ashes of your life

So in the absence of any other sort of plan
You set off on the long trek to what used to be home

After a journey of many weeks, you're in sight of home
The old town still looks the same as it ever was
You're rehearsing the grovelling apology in your mind
One tired foot in front of the other
And now you can see the family home

Suddenly you see a figure spring up on the front porch
You'd know that shape anywhere
That's your dad
Now this is a bit horrifying
He's hitched up his skirts and he's running towards you
Men of his age and stature do not run
Not in this culture
Certainly not in public

He must be in an out-of-control rage
He must be going to stop you coming any closer to the house
Send you on your way
That grovelling apology is probably not even going to be heard
All this way for a beating in the street
At least you know you deserve it

But suddenly this undignified running man is upon you
And you're wrapped up in the biggest bear-hug
And he's sobbing tears of joy over you
"My beloved child. Welcome home."

You try to start your prepared speech
“Obviously I can’t ever be your child again
But I badly need a job
And I’m so sorry for what I did to you.”
But he doesn’t seem to be listening
And he hasn’t stopped hugging you
“My beloved child. You’re home at last.”

“Come on into the house
Have a bath and I’ll find you some clean clothes
I’ll tell the staff to down tools
and gather for a welcome home party
I’ve been dreaming of this party for years
We’ll roast the fatted calf on the spit
and eat and drink and sing and dance all night
My beloved child. I can’t believe it.
You’re home at last.”

Let’s change perspective again
and see this party through another set of eyes
Imagine yourself now as the older sibling
You’re the one who stayed home
The one who stayed loyal to the family
The responsible one who always did the right thing

You’re the sole heir now
The one who owns it all
But there have been times you have resented your irresponsible younger sibling
Times when another pair of hands would have made a real difference
Times when it would have been easier to get some needed time off
had there been a partner to step into the breach
But you’ve always gritted your teeth and soldiered on
Your father could always depend on you

Today you are arriving home after being out on business
You hear the sounds of music and laughter
What’s the big occasion?
As you untie your boots on the porch
one of the staff steps out, a beer in hand
“What’s going on?” you ask
“The young un’s turned up out of the blue
You’re not an only child any more
Your dad’s given us all two days off for a party
and put the fatted calf on the spit
Biggest party I’ve seen in years.”

Something knots up deep in your guts
When did you ever get a party?
All these years proving that you were not like that one

Proving that you deserved your inheritance
That you'd never shame your father
All these years
And when did you ever get a party?

You pull your boots back on in disgust
and stomp off towards the gate
The front door opens again
It's your dad
"Come on in and celebrate," he says
"We're a family again
How good is that?"

"How good is that?!" you spit back
"That bludger is no family of mine
How can you even think it?
That scumbag humiliated you in public
Tore your heart out and swanned off
Took all you gave and partied it away to nothing
You and I have slaved while that one partied
The last thing that lowlife deserves is another party!"

"But how can we not celebrate?" pleads your dad
"I haven't been so happy in years
Finally I have my family back together
Finally I have both my beloved children again
After all this time, all this heartache
finally we can be a whole family again
You're losing nothing here
Everything I have is still yours
But love is not diminished when it is shared
There's love for all in a family reunited
Come on in and join the celebration"

But you will not
No way known
Not now, not ever
The very thought of that scumbag
being held up alongside you
and celebrated as part of your family
as the second beloved child
just as beloved as you
you who proved yourself worthy of such love
you who's never been given a party
The very thought of it makes you sick
Your anger hardens to contempt
You storm off into the night
slamming the gate
You'll be back at work tomorrow

Even if you're the only one there
But you may never talk to the old man again

To really understand what Jesus is saying with these stories
we have to finish up
by looking through the father's eyes again
So imagine yourself again as the father
Pleading with your ever dependable older child on the porch
Sadly watching your beloved child
stomping off into the night
while the sounds of the party still fill the air

All you had ever longed for
was that you could all be together again
To be family again
You loved them both
Your love wasn't measured out by merit
It wasn't for sale to the hardest worker
The property inheritance worked that way
That's the law
But your love was never a reward for effort
It was just love
Love overflowing for your beloved children
No matter what

This is breaking your heart all over again
One child is asking to be your slave
The other is claiming to have never been anything but a slave
Why can't they both accept your love
and know themselves free?

Why is the older so obsessed with the younger?
So obsessed with being different?
So obsessed with being better?
Why is the older so consumed by hostility for the younger?
So unable to relax and feel loved by you
unless the younger is cast out and rejected?

Why can't these two love each other again?
Why does first one, and now the other,
insist on tearing the family apart
on tearing your heart out?
As long as either one is hating the other
they will despise you for loving them both the same
So when one hates the other
they reject you too
and the family is broken all over again
and more than ever

There you stand on the porch
Tears streaming
Heart shattered
The arse falling out of your world
Suspended between the sound of a party
and the sound of a gate slamming

“Here is my heart, broken for you
Both of you
Here is my life, poured out for you
Both of you
Just when I thought I had you both back
There is an empty place at the table again
An empty place in my heart
A place that can only be filled
when you love one another
so we can come to the table together
Here is my heart, here is my body
Broken
Broken for you
All of you