



Roanoke, Virginia
Father's Day, June 16, 2024

“Family Recognition”

Luke 15:11-32

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Some have asked that I share reflections on my trip to India for my daughter's wedding. I have not found time to put together a presentation, but I'll share a little bit right now.

Before going to India, I wondered how a wedding could last three days (I'm told some last five). I saw what was planned. There were (and I'm going to mispronounce some of these):

- The Graha Shanti—a three hour prayer service for the couple and immediate family members,
- A Haldi oil ceremony involving family members where bride and groom are anointed,
- A Sangeet event of music and dance,
- A Mehndi ceremony where Henna applications are made to hands and feet,
- Multiple meals together
- And, of course, the Saat Pher, the wedding ceremony itself.

Having returned, I have a better appreciation for why there was so much planned. A Hindu wedding is not about the joining of a bride and groom so much as the joining of two families. Over the course of three days, the bride and groom's family and friends mix and mingle as they go through these experiences together. My favorite event was the Sangeet. Different family and friend groupings offered a prepared dance. It's amazing I enjoyed it so much, because I had dreaded it thinking I might mess up (which I *did not* by the way). Then, the dance floor was open. No one was allowed to dance with just one partner. Men and women, Indian and American, Hindu, Christian and others, jumped in and out of dances with each other with lots of laughing and



foolishness. On that floor, allegiances to bride and groom—differences of race, culture and religion—disappeared.

I came home with real feelings of kinship and friendship with people who at first seemed very different. Isn't that what you want to have happen at a wedding?

Our passage today is about kinship—recognizing it and denying it.

I chose our passage so I can finish what our Bible School speaker, Tom Are started. Last Sunday, his sermon was based on the first two parables of Luke 15—the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Today, I want to talk about the last parable about a Father and his two sons (Happy Father's Day, by the way). Next year's Bible School speaker, Ed McLeod, would tell you that both the lost sheep and the lost coin find their way into the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I asked Millie if she would find them, and she suggested the coin is seen in the profligate spending and the sheep is seen in the lamp served at the feast. That's good. But here is what Ed said. The sheep knows it is lost. The coin does not. Listen for who is the sheep and who is the coin as I read Luke 15:11-32.

READ LUKE 15:11-32:

¹¹ Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ So 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. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But 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. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, ²⁴ for 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 as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for



him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But 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.'

You heard the first thing Jesus said, didn't you? It's important. "A man has *two* sons." We are to remember that he has two sons at every point in the parable, the beginning,

- when one decides to leave and the other stays;
- the middle,
- when one irresponsibly squanders his inheritance and the other responsibly tends to business at home,
- and again
- when one comes home a disgrace while the other is out in the field working;
- and at the end,
- when one is the honored guest at the party and the other is sulking outside.

We'll start at the beginning. A Father has two sons and loses one of them.

The Younger comes to the father and asks that he be given his half of the inheritance. You probably have heard this story many times before (I've preached on this passage more than any other in the Bible). Even so, you might have missed this one point. The Father gives an inheritance to *both* sons. He *divides* his inheritance between them. The younger son was rude and inappropriate in asking for his inheritance early, as if he were wishing his dad to be dead already, but the Younger isn't walking away with something while the Older gets nothing. The Older may feel that way, but he is not treated unfairly.

Despite the affront, the father lets the younger go. We can only speculate why: maybe this could be a way his irresponsible boy will become a responsible adult. I mean, sometimes that works out, right? One learns from mistakes, achieves some things without help, finds one's own path in the world. People leave too young, but then they grow up. Sometimes, it works out.

Sometimes it doesn't. This younger son finds himself all right.

- finds himself in the wrong company.
- finds himself wasting his inheritance in selfish indulgence. He finds himself envying the pig slop.
- finds himself having lost everything but his memory of how life used to be "back home."

When I was in Jackson, MS, I had a friend named Hosea Hines who was a pastor at a black church. We'd get together from time to time to talk shop. Once, he wanted me to consider this parable from an African American perspective, so he shared with me a sermon titled, "*How Do You Know When You Are Grown?*" Hosea found two things to admire in the Younger even when he was at his worst. First, the young man realized he was suffering the consequences of his own bad



choices. He doesn't shift blame. He knows he had made himself unworthy of this Father's name. He then tries to make it right. He takes a job. It is a demeaning job—doesn't pay the rent—he is treated poorly, unjustly, almost like a slave—but at least he refuses to give up.

The second thing Hosea found admirable in the younger son is that he is willing to be honest with himself. It is a mark of maturity when you can look at your own life, see it for what it is instead of what you want it to be or what it is supposed to be. Hosea saw a humbled man who sees both the mess he has made of his life and sees the unjust conditions where someone without voice or rights is taken advantage of. Being realistic, he doesn't come up with another grandiose idea of how, if others will just give him what he wants or at least get out of his way, he can make his fame and fortune. He makes reasonable decisions about what he can do. Finding a little dignity back home is better than living with no dignity in the far country. He is going to face the father he disgraced and is going to say to him, "Father, I messed up. I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son, I know that. But could you see the way clear to hire me as a servant so I can live?"

As humbled and realistic as the Younger is, his logic is flawed. "A Father has two sons." That fact has never changed for the father. So, the son is confused when his father runs to him looking as silly as lovers do in movies where they run into each other's arms out in a field. The Younger is confused by his father's embrace and kiss. It doesn't make sense, but he prepared what he was going to say, and he tries to say it. But his father isn't listening. He's too busy barking instructions to dress the boy up, prepare a feast, kill the fatted calf, find musicians for the dance—, "for this my son was dead, and is alive again; this boy was lost, and is back with us again."

The son could spend away his inheritance but could not spend away his father's love. The younger thought his father's love was something to be earned. But having come home a *nobody* after trying to be a *somebody*, he learns that *he can't cease to be a son because the Father remains his father.*

It would be great for the story to end here with this beautiful picture of reconciliation. But the story is not over. Why? A man has *two* sons.

Only, the Older no longer thinks he has a younger brother. The Younger lost brother-status with the Older when he took and squandered his inheritance. I don't think the Older is heartless. Even the strictest of Pharisees have prescribed ways that those who have been banned from the faith can work their way back in. My guess is that there might be ways the Younger can work his way back into the family. I imagine the Older saying, "Sure, let him have what he is asking for. Let him live as a servant for a while." That's charity. But he has to earn it. Now is not the time to treat him as an equal? When his father asks why the Older won't come join the party, he makes clear why he won't: "...when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!" You heard it: "This son of yours."

His father won't let him get away with that. He says back to the Older. "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this *your* brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."



I didn't read all of chapter 15, so let me remind you to whom Jesus is telling this parable. They are Pharisees and Scribes who have just criticized Jesus for spending time with—having meals with—people who deserve to be canceled. It could be their immoral actions—those prostitutes—or it could be those whose allegiances are not acceptable—those tax collectors. Can you think in our day of those who are shunned because of something they said or did—or someone whose views are unacceptable, or whose allegiance to a group, party or candidate is not to be forgiven? It doesn't matter to these Pharisees and Scribes if Jesus does not indulge in their behavior, or Jesus does not share their views, or Jesus doesn't take part in their rallies. If Jesus doesn't shun them, then Jesus should be shunned.

Let's go back to *this year's* Bible School speaker. Years ago, I heard Tom speak about this third parable. (I'm sorry I have to clean up after him and finish what he started). It was at my church in Mississippi. At that church in the deep south, with its long and difficult history concerning race, Tom made an interesting point. He said that for generations in the deep south, whites and blacks tried to disown any possibility of a kinship relationship with each other. We tried to keep it separate but unequal. Everyone knows their place. Absolutely no interracial marriages. Blacks could work for whites, even have a friendly relationship, but they were to stay out of each other's homes, not eat at the same tables, not drink from the same fountains. Blacks were to keep their hands off the jobs, property, houses, and privileges that were the inheritance of whites.

Yet, Tom added, we white southerners don't know who we were except in relation to the other race. If you're over 50 years old and lived in the deep you know what Tom meant when he said that. Whites and blacks in Greenwood, Mississippi defined themselves by the other. One's place and dignity were measured in how much was lost or gained, or how much there was yet to be lost or gained, in relation to the other race. This was true for those trying to maintain a separation of the races and was true for those trying to break those barriers down. You knew what it was to be white by not being black, and you knew what it was to be black by not being white.

Tom suggested that the path forward in race relations was to be reminded of this truth: **“These brothers and sisters of yours.”** Seeing a family connection between the races is to have an entirely different perspective on how we are to treat each other. The problems are still there, the issues remain, but now we have a different motivation to work them out. It is what families do.

My Jackson church knew the truth of what Tom was saying in a way that had nothing to do with race. In the 80s, there was a widespread attempt to have churches recognize and accept that church members struggle with addictions. In many congregations, it was not something acknowledged or talked about. If addiction did come to the surface, it was something to be ashamed of or to judge. Many churches had someone dressed as an elephant show up to worship on a designated Sunday and sit in a pew. It was to make the point that addiction was real, even if unacknowledged. This program was not where the expression, “The elephant in the room” started, but they used the image to make the point. My Jackson church didn't need to have that stunt pulled on them. We were blessed to have members who were open and honest about their addiction struggles. We knew their names, shared pews in worship, casseroles during church night suppers, and worked together on committees or on Habitat builds. Even when some relapsed, they remained brothers and sisters within the church family. We checked on them, visited them.



Somehow, it made it easier to come back home to church from the far country of relapse. It even made it easier to stay home and not relapse because there was a church family of support.

With this parable, Jesus is speaking to one of the most pervasive mandates of the entire Bible. It is going to sound naïve, but it is this— At the end of God’s Day, we are all related. At the end of God’s Day, we’re all family; Jew and Gentile, sinner and saint, male and female. In the biblical worldview, all human issues are *family issues* and all *human problems* are *family problems*. To talk down to a waitress who gets your order wrong is to be rude to your sister. To reject another for his views, is to reject a brother. To demean someone for how they look or for what they have or don’t have is to demean a family member. To kidnap, rape or drop bombs on neighborhoods of those of another nation or religion is to kill relatives. When harm is done to another, whether of the spirit or the body, the Father is saying,

“Oh, this brother of yours.”

“This sister of yours.”

Seeing the family resemblance doesn’t solve things. Family squabbles can be hard in and of themselves and the stakes can be high. But it is harder to justify the worst we can do to each other if we consider that on some *spiritual* level the harm we do is domestic abuse.

I’ll close with an imagination exercise. Picture in your mind the type of person you least want to claim any kinship.

It might be a family member.

It might be someone you know,

It might be an ex-friend.

It might be someone who looks or acts a certain way-

or believes a certain way-

or belongs to a certain party-

or is a citizen of a certain nation.

Imagine God telling you,

“This brother of yours.”

“This sister of yours.”

You are related by birth...

by *Christ’s* birth.

You may still need some space.

You may need boundaries

And you may need to protect your boundaries.

But you can’t disown the spiritual kinship.

Why, because the Father remains the Father.

Someday there will be a party and through the open doors you will see some people there that you spent your life avoiding. Will you go in?

