

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
March 14, '10

LENTEN LESSONS FROM LUKE  
"FEASTING ON FORGIVENESS"

I WAS IN THE THIRD GRADE - THE PLAYGROUND AT LUNCHTIME RECESS.

I DROPPED A WRAPPER – I THINK IT MAY HAVE BEEN FROM A HOSTESS TWINKIE.

THE TEACHER MONITORING RECESS ACTIVITIES SAW ME & PULLED ME ASIDE & TOLD ME I WAS GOING TO BE PUNISHED.

SHE GAVE ME A BUCKET & TOLD ME THAT FOR THE REST OF THAT WEEK, I WOULD BE PICKING UP LITTER ON THE PLAYGROUND AT RECESS.

TWO OTHER STUDENTS WERE GUILTY OF THE SIMILAR OFFENSES AND THEY, TOO, WERE GIVEN BUCKETS. THAT WAS OUR FATE FOR THE REST OF THAT WEEK.

WE SIMPLY WALKED AROUND THE SCHOOL GROUNDS & PICKED UP TRASH.

NO SWINGS, NO MONKEY BARS, NO KICKBALL – JUST TRASH PICK-UP.

I'M NOT SURE WHY I DID WHAT I DID THE FOLLOWING MONDAY.

I'M NOT SURE IF IT WAS SIMPLY A REBELLIOUS ATTITUDE OR IF, PERHAPS, I HAD JUST LEARNED THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS TO WALK TWO MILES IF SOMEONE FORCES YOU TO WALK ONE & GIVE YOUR SHIRT IF YOUR COAT IS TAKEN FROM YOU, BUT THE NEXT WEEK, WHEN I WAS TOLD THAT I WAS RELIEVED OF MY TRASH DUTY, I ASKED IF I COULD KEEP DOING IT.

SO DID MY TWO PARTNERS IN CRIME.

WE TOOK OUR BUCKETS & PICKED UP TRASH THAT DAY & THE WHOLE WEEK.

IN FACT, FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE ENTIRE SCHOOL YEAR, ALL THREE OF US SPENT EVERY LUNCH HOUR PICKING UP TRASH ON THE SCHOOL GROUNDS.

OF COURSE, THE SCHOOL DIDN'T OBJECT.

IN FACT, THEY EVEN GAVE US A NAME.

THEY CALLED US "THE BUCKET BRIGADE."

DURING THE ASSEMBLY ON THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL, WHEN SOME STUDENTS WERE BEING HONORED FOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS & OTHERS FOR THEIR ATHLETIC & SOCIAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS, THE PRINCIPAL CALLED THE 3 OF US TO THE FRONT OF THE GYMNASIUM & EXPRESSED HIS APPRECIATION FOR THE EFFORTS OF "THE BUCKET BRIGADE" IN MAINTAINING THE BEAUTY OF OUR SCHOOL GROUNDS.

I REALLY DON'T KNOW WHY WE CHOSE TO DO IT.

IT WAS ACTUALLY A LITTLE WEIRD.

THERE'S OBVIOUSLY SOMETHING ENDEARING ABOUT IT, BUT WHEN I THINK ABOUT IT NOW, I THINK OF THREE BOYS WALKING AROUND WITH THEIR HEADS DOWN LOOKING FOR TRASH – LOOKING FOR SOMETHING WRONG WHEN ALL AROUND US EVERYONE WAS HAVING FUN.

I THINK THAT'S A PART OF WHAT JESUS WAS ADDRESSING IN THIS PARABLE.

HE'S TALKING ABOUT PEOPLE WHO REFUSE TO OPEN THEIR EYES TO THE FUN GOING ON AROUND THEM BECAUSE THEY CAN'T KEEP THEMSELVES FROM FOCUSING ON WHAT THEY SEE AS TRASH.

THIS IS A PARABLE ABOUT A PARTY.

WHEN WE LOOK AT THE PARABLES JESUS TOLD, WE HAVE TO LOOK AT THE CONTEXT IN WHICH HE TOLD THEM.

WITH THIS ONE – THE LONGEST & MOST BELOVED PARABLE HE EVER TOLD – WE SEE FROM THE OPENING VERSES WHAT THE SITUATION WAS THAT JESUS WAS ADDRESSING WITH THIS STORY.

IT BEGINS WITH LUKE TELLING US THAT JESUS WAS PARTYING WITH TAX COLLECTORS & SINNERS.

HE WAS ASSOCIATING WITH THE MOST DESPICABLE PEOPLE IMAGINABLE.

THIS NATURALLY OFFENDED THE PIOUS RELIGIOUS FOLKS.

AND SO JESUS TOLD THIS STORY TO HELP THEM UNDERSTAND WHY.

ACTUALLY, HE TOLD 3 PARABLES TO MAKE THE POINT.

IN OUR LECTIONARY READING, WE SKIPPED OVER THE FIRST TWO.

SINCE WE'LL COME BACK TO THOSE PARABLES LATER IN THE CHURCH YEAR, I'VE DECIDED TO JUST STICK WITH THE ONE DESIGNATED FOR TODAY – THE ONE KNOWN AS “THE PRODIGAL SON.”

BUT IN TELLING ALL THREE STORIES, JESUS IS SAYING – “*YOU WANT TO KNOW WHY I'M DOING WHAT I'M DOING? LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT A WOMAN WHO LOST A COIN. DO YOU GET IT?*”

“*LET ME TELL YOU A MAN WHO LOST A SHEEP. NOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND?*”

“*OKAY, THEN – HOW ABOUT THIS – A MAN HAD TWO SONS...*”

HE'S TELLING THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS HE'S THROWING PARTIES FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD THE MESSAGE OF GOD'S LOVE & GRACE & SALVATION & ALL *THEY* CAN DO IS FOCUS ON THE BAD STUFF!

IT'S LIKE ME & MY FRIENDS WALKING AROUND THAT PLAYGROUND WITH OUR EYES TO THE GROUND, ZEROING IN ON EVERYTHING THAT WAS WRONG WHILE EVERYONE AROUND US WAS HAVING A BLAST!

ONE OF THE PROBLEMS WITH THIS PARABLE IS THAT IT'S SO FAMILIAR TO VIRTUALLY EVERY PERSON HERE TODAY.

THAT'S UNFORTUNATE.

I DON'T MEAN THAT IT'S UNFORTUNATE THAT YOU KNOW THE PARABLE AS WELL AS YOU DO.

I'M NOT TRYING TO SAY SOMETHING SLICK LIKE “*YOU JUST THINK YOU KNOW THIS PARABLE BUT YOU REALLY DON'T.*”

MAYBE YOU DO & MAYBE YOU DON'T, BUT THAT'S NOT WHY I CONSIDER IT UNFORTUNATE THAT VIRTUALLY EVERYONE HERE TODAY KNOWS THIS PARABLE.

WHAT'S UNFORTUNATE ABOUT THAT IS THAT IT SAYS WE'RE NOT DOING OUR JOB.

WE'RE NOT BRINGING PEOPLE INTO THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH WHO REALLY *DON'T* KNOW THE STORY OF THE PRODIGAL SON.

THE VERY MESSAGE IT TEACHES IS THAT JESUS WAS PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS TO THOSE WHO HAD A DESPERATE NEED TO HEAR IT.

IT WAS JUST 6 MONTHS AGO THAT MORE THAN 125 OF US PARTICIPATED IN THE “*UNBINDING YOUR HEART*” STUDY.

MOST OF YOU AGREED THAT IT WAS A WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE – A WAY OF GROWING IN TWO AREAS – PRAYER & EVANGELISM.

I HOPE YOU’RE STILL FEELING GOOD ABOUT THE WAY IN WHICH IT HAS ENHANCED YOUR PRAYER LIFE, BUT WHAT ABOUT EVANGELISM?

ARE YOU SINCERELY LOOKING FOR THOSE WHO HAVEN’T HEARD THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD’S LOVE, GRACE & FORGIVENESS IN JESUS CHRIST?

WHEN WE LOOK AT THIS PARABLE JESUS TOLD, WE ALL KNOW THE STORY WELL, DON’T WE?

I REMEMBER THE FIRST LESSON IN PREACHING I EVER RECEIVED.

IT WAS FROM MY MENTOR “MAC.”

WHEN I DECIDED I WAS GOING TO ATTEND SEMINARY, I TOLD MAC THAT I WAS AFRAID I WASN’T READY FOR SEMINARY BECAUSE I DIDN’T HAVE ANY IDEA HOW TO GO ABOUT PREPARING A SERMON.

WE WERE STANDING IN THE HALL OF THE CHURCH.

MAC ALWAYS SEEMED TO CARRY A YELLOW PAD OF PAPER WITH HIM & HE PULLED OUT THAT PAD & SAID, “*DENNIS, HERE’S YOUR FIRST LESSON IN SERMON PREPARATION.*”

HE WROTE “*THE PRODIGAL SON.*”

UNDERNEATH IT & SLIGHTLY INDENTED, HE WROTE “*THE YOUNGER SON.*”

UNDERNEATH THAT, HE WROTE “*THE ELDER SON*” AND UNDERNEATH THAT, “*THE LOVING FATHER.*”

HE TORE OFF THE SHEET, HANDED IT TO ME, AND SAID – “*THERE. YOU’VE GOT YOUR FIRST SERMON OUTLINE.*”

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, I STILL HAVE THAT SHEET OF PAPER.

THAT IS THE OUTLINE OF THIS PARABLE, ISN’T IT?

WE’VE GOT THE THREE MAIN CHARACTERS & WE KNOW THE STORY SO WELL.

BUT WHERE DO WE PLACE OUR EMPHASIS?

WE KNOW IT AS “THE PRODIGAL SON.”

THAT’S HOW WE CUSTOMARILY REFER TO IT.

WE THINK OF THE YOUNGER SON WHO LEFT HOME, DEMANDING HIS SHARE OF HIS FATHER’S INHERITANCE.

HE MUST BE THE MAIN CHARACTER IN THIS DRAMA.

AH, BUT SOMEONE SURELY RECOGNIZES THAT IT’S MORE ABOUT THE LOVING FATHER WHO RUNS TO GREET HIS WAYWARD CHILD BEFORE HE EVEN ARRIVES.

LET ME SUGGEST THAT YOU HAVE TO REMEMBER THE CONTEXT.

YOU HAVE TO REMEMBER THE AUDIENCE JESUS IS ADDRESSING.

HE'S TELLING THIS STORY TO A BUNCH OF OLDER BROTHERS – TO THOSE WHO CONSIDER THEMSELVES PURE & HOLY & RELIGIOUS & RIGHTEOUS.

THEY DETEST THE IDEA OF JESUS MINGLING WITH PEOPLE WHO *AREN'T* PURE & HOLY & RELIGIOUS & RIGHTEOUS.

THERE'S A STORY OF ST. PETER & ST. PAUL STANDING AT THE PEARLY GATES.

PAUL IS LOOKING THROUGH THE BOOK OF NAMES & HE SAYS TO PETER, *"THERE ARE MORE PEOPLE IN HEAVEN THAN THERE ARE SUPPOSED TO BE. GO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENED."*

PETER RUNS OFF & THEN RETURNS AFTER A SHORT TIME.

PAUL ASKS, *"DID YOU FIND OUT WHY THERE ARE TOO MANY PEOPLE HERE?"*

PETER SAYS, *"IT'S JESUS. HE'S HELPING PEOPLE IN OVER THE BACK FENCE AGAIN."*

YES, JESUS INDEED IS THE ONE WHO HELPS PEOPLE IN OVER THE BACK FENCE.

HE'S THE ONE WHO WELCOMES THOSE WHOM THE RELIGIOUS FOLKS DIDN'T WANT TO BE THERE.

HE'S THE ONE WHO EATS WITH SINNERS & TAX-COLLECTORS & TELLS THEM HOW MUCH GOD LOVES THEM.

HE'S THE ONE WHO THROWS PARTIES FOR THE LOST & INVITES THEM TO FEASTS OF FORGIVENESS.

SO MAYBE OUR EMPHASIS IN THE PARABLE SHOULD REALLY BE ON THE OLDER BROTHER.

IF YOU'RE HONEST WITH YOURSELF, ISN'T HE THE ONE WITH WHOM YOU MOST CLOSELY IDENTIFY.

BUT – LET'S FACE IT - HE'S GOT A POINT, DOESN'T HE?

IT'S ONE THING FOR DAD TO FORGIVE HIS LITTLE BROTHER.

IT'S QUITE ANOTHER TO THROW HIM A PARTY!

THAT'S WHAT'S REALLY OFFENSIVE TO THE OLDER BROTHER & THAT'S WHAT WAS OFFENSIVE TO THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS LISTENING AS JESUS TOLD THE STORY AND....ISN'T THAT WHAT'S MOST OFFENSIVE TO US TODAY?

*"LET THE PENITENT RETURN. SURE. THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH THAT. BUT LET HIM RETURN TO BREAD & WATER – NOT FATTED CALF & FRUIT OF THE VINEYARD! TO SACKCLOTH & ASHES – NOT EXPENSIVE ROBES & RINGS & PARTYING!"*

IT JUST DOESN'T SIT WELL WITH US, DOES IT?

WE DON'T LIKE PEOPLE FEASTING ON FORGIVENESS WITHOUT A BIT OF GROVELING FIRST.

WE DON'T LIKE JESUS HELPING PEOPLE OVER THE BACK FENCE OF HEAVEN WHEN THEY HAVEN'T FIRST GONE THROUGH AN INQUISITION AT THE PEARLY GATES.

WE'D RATHER KEEP OUR HEADS DOWN – FOCUSING ON THE TRASH RATHER THAN LOOKING AROUND AT ALL THE FUN EVERYONE'S HAVING.

HERE'S A KEY, THOUGH, TO UNDERSTANDING WHAT THIS PARABLE IS REALLY ALL ABOUT.

IT INVOLVES A SIMPLE QUESTION – *WHO IN THIS PARABLE IS THE PRODIGAL?*

DON'T YOU HATE QUESTIONS LIKE THAT?

YOU KNOW THE ANSWER.

IT'S OBVIOUSLY THE YOUNGER SON.

BUT THEN, AGAIN, MAYBE THAT'S *TOO* OBVIOUS.

SO YOU THINK IT MUST BE THE *OLDER* SON.

BUT YOU GO BACK AGAIN & SAY TO YOURSELF, "WELL, HE'S MADE IT SO OBVIOUS THAT HE THINKS I'M GOING TO CONCLUDE THAT IT'S A TRICK QUESTION & SAY THE OLDER SON WHEN IN ACTUALITY IT'S THE YOUNGER!"

SORRY. NEITHER SON IS THE REAL PRODIGAL IN THIS STORY.

THE OVERWHELMINGLY PRODIGAL PERSON IN THIS STORY IS UNQUESTIONABLY – THE FATHER!

DO YOU KNOW WHAT PRODIGAL MEANS?

IT MEANS "RASHLY OR RECKLESSLY OR WASTEFULLY EXTRAVAGANT."

IT MEANS "GIVING IN ABUNDANCE – LAVISHLY & PROFUSELY."

NO MATTER HOW RASH, RECKLESS OR WASTEFUL THE YOUNGER SON WAS IN HIS EXTRAVAGANCE, HE DOESN'T TOUCH HIS FATHER IN GIVING LAVISHING & PROFUSELY!

THIS FATHER IS AS PRODIGAL AS PRODIGAL CAN BE – WITH BOTH OF HIS SONS!

THE FATHER IN THIS PARABLE TREATS HIS CHILDREN AS OUR HEAVENLY FATHER TREATS US – LAVISHLY & EXTRAVAGANTLY!

WHY ARE WE SO AFRAID OF THE PARTIES GOD WANTS TO THROW?

WHY CAN'T WE FEAST ON FORGIVENESS – OUR OWN UNMERITED FORGIVENESS AS WELL AS THE FORGIVENESS OF THOSE WE THINK SHOULDN'T BE COMING IN OVER THE BACK FENCE?

I REMEMBER ATTENDING A WEDDING RECEPTION A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO.

IT WAS THE DAUGHTER OF A FAMILY FRIEND & I REMEMBER BEING ASTOUNDED THAT ONE OF OUR BOYS WAS TAKEN ONTO THE DANCE FLOOR WHEN THE MUSIC BEGAN & HE NEVER LEFT THE ENTIRE NIGHT.

THOSE OF YOU WHO KNOW OUR 3 SONS WILL PROBABLY HAVE NO TROUBLE GUESSING WHICH OF THE THREE THAT WAS.

DREW WAS 4 YEARS OLD & THAT NIGHT – AS WE'VE SAID MANY TIMES – "HE POLKAED THE NIGHT AWAY!"

HE PROBABLY DANCED MORE THAT NIGHT THAN HIS FATHER HAS DANCED IN HIS ENTIRE LIFE!

SOME OF US JUST HAVE MORE TROUBLE PARTYING THAN OTHERS – WHETHER IT'S A RECEPTION IN A WEDDING HALL OR A FEAST OF FORGIVENESS IN A CHURCH SANCTUARY.

OUR PRODIGAL GOD INVITES US TO A PARTY HE'S THROWING.

HE THROWS IT IN YOUR HONOR & IN HONOR OF ALL THOSE JESUS IS LETTING IN OVER THE BACK FENCE.

WHAT WOULD IT MEAN FOR US TO JOIN IN?

WHAT WOULD IT MEAN FOR US – RIGHT HERE AT EASTMINSTER – TO BECOME A "PRODIGAL CHURCH" – A CHURCH THAT IS RASHLY, RECKLESSLY & WASTEFULLY EXTRAVAGANT IN THROWING PARTIES FOR TAX COLLECTORS & SINNERS – FOR THOSE THE WORLD DEEMS WICKED & LOST?

**NOTICE HOW THIS PARABLE ENDS.**

**LIKE SO MANY GOOD STORIES, IT DOESN'T.**

**WE DON'T KNOW WHAT THE ELDER BROTHER DID.**

**DID HE CONTINUE TO LIVE LIKE "THE BUCKET BRIGADE" – WITH HIS HEAD DOWN LOOKING FOR BAD STUFF?**

**OR DID HE RAISE HIS EYES, SEE ALL THE FUN GOING ON AROUND HIM & DECIDED TO JOIN IN?**

**WHAT WILL YOU – AND WHAT WILL WE – DECIDE TO DO? AMEN.**

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