

A Robe, a Ring, and a Fatted Calf



Swanson, John August, Prodigal Son, 1984
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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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The story begins with the younger son's request, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." This request sets the story in motion by its terribly cruelty, cutting off all ties with his father. The desire to receive his inheritance "now" makes it look as if to him his father has not died soon enough. "What good are you to me, old man?" His severe disrespect shows his utter lack of recognition of what he is actually demanding. His request for 'property' (v. 12) uses the Greek word "*ousia*." It is a word equivalent to "substance" or "stuff." The boy thinks he is just asking for money – for what he considers his stuff. He could care less about the impact this will have on his father and their relationship. He just wants out, he wants cash, and he burns all bridges behind him.

But the Father's perspective is the opposite. What the father gives his son in that same verse, translated as "property," is the Greek word *bios*. Its literal meaning is "life." The younger sees this as a transaction in goods. The response of the father consists of

giving of what is life (*bios*). It is as if the younger has no clue what he is asking. It is as if the father understands life comes – and can only be found – in the form of gift. Our life is not just about “stuff.” Life is about our relationships with each other and the love that we share. Gifts are ‘bios,’ life – and this is what is most important. “*Ousia* and *bios*,” we live in the tension between these two words. What is the difference between seeing the people and things in our lives as stuff, material, or inanimate blocks versus seeing them as life, meaning, or living connections? *Ousia* or *bios*? How do we view the people around us? Do we look at them as objects to be manipulated or ways to get more stuff for ourselves? Or do we see them with genuine love as individuals with their own hopes, personalities and needs?

The story goes on that instead of saving his stuff the boy ended up with empty pockets when a severe famine struck. So yes, he may have been dumb and wasteful – but he was also unlucky. It wasn’t his fault that the world changed around him. He was foolish not only because he wasted and spent all of his inheritance; he was also foolish because he had cut off all ties with his home and family. He had no one except strangers to support him when life went sideways. He had gone through his *ousia* – his stuff – but now was almost about to lose his life – *bios*. He managed to land a job in a pigpen tending pigs, which for Jews was the lowest possible kind of work, since pigs were ritually unclean. Soon he ended up wishing he could eat some pods in the slop of those filthy pigs. That’s when he ‘came to himself.’ He remembered his relationship to his father and his home – and realized his utter foolishness.

You may have heard of studies of the adolescent brain that say that the connections of the young brain with the pre-frontal cortex are not developed; the myelin sheath is not formed so that the connections are sluggish. This is the part of the brain that deals with figuring out the consequences of actions, realistic analysis of the future, and mature ideas about relationships and practical planning. So...here we see this adolescent brain in action in the Prodigal Son. “*Who cares about the future or about what you, my parent, are feeling? I just want it all now. So hand it over!*” It reminds me of a book about adolescent behavior that has the title, “I hate you, but can you drop me and Cheryl off at the mall?” Kids tend to take the love and help of their parents for granted; they treat them terribly without thinking twice.

Debra Tannen writes this in her book “You’re Wearing That?”

“I was one of those daughters who saw my mother as my enemy when I was a teen. Indeed, I was precocious: I had bitter complaints about and judgments of her from my elementary school days. When I was in my twenties, one of the things that put me off was that my mother seemed to long for my company so much. And I was taken by surprise when, the first time I began a letter to her ‘Dearest Mom,’ she replied that she had waited her whole life to hear me say that...The longer my mother lives – and I am extremely lucky that she lived long – the more I realized that I cherished and sought her

love. I didn't think about this earlier because I took it for granted: I counted the ways that she had failed me, the ways that she had angered and hurt me, because her love and the many ways she showed it were part of the landscape. I never questioned that if I came home for a visit, she would be happy to see me, to have me stay as long as I wished." (245-246)

This young man in the story was a typical adolescent, not thinking ahead or looking at the bigger picture. He takes his relationship with his father and family completely for granted. All he wants is his stuff, his property, his cash, and he could care less about his father's feelings. The older brother in the story was probably also quite young; neither of the sons was married, so they were both probably still teens. He was no hero either. If the younger son was a foolish mess; the older son was a stuck-up, judgmental prig. He wouldn't even go inside to the party. He called his brother, 'your son' to the father, instead of 'my brother.' He pouts that his father never gave him a goat to feast with his friends. He is the kind of self-righteous snob who shuts others out – with envy, resentment, criticism, rage, distorted judgments, power, and contempt. These cause divisions and fractures in our families and our relationships, and even in our nation. We hear this kind of judgmentalism and censorship, pointing fingers at those deemed 'other,' outsider, undesirable, alien, less-than. People are cancelled, rejected, and even deported, while the entitled 'older brothers' feel self-assured and self-righteous. The older brother complains that he has worked like a *slave* on the farm. Like a slave – that's not a great description of his relationship with his father.

Neither the older or younger trusts that they can be treated as the father's honored children. Neither trusts the father's love. Both want to pull the plug, loose the tow-rope, and drift away. Sad. But how about God? Does God write them off? No. Not as Jesus understands God.

Fr. Gregory Boyle, who runs "Home Boy Industries" in LA for former gang members, said this: *"The thing I deal with all the time is this idea of the good guy and the bad guy. Desmond Tutu says there are no monsters. There are monstrous acts, but there are no monsters. And to that you might go, "Well, yes, there are," or you might say, "Well, duh," but either way, the truth is, we operate like there are monsters. We operate as if there are people out there who don't belong to us. Ask Jesus to identify somebody who doesn't belong to us, you're going to get a big fat zero. Jesus will not be able to come up with a name."*

The father explains to the older son why he is celebrating the return of his brother: *"this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."* Life is most important, not money, not stuff, not property- but life. It's not the money, the property, that is the issue, but the son's rejection of his parents and his family. Now he has returned, he has realized what he had taken for granted, a love that is beyond rejection.

That's what we celebrate in this parable today: the astounding love of the father, who is able to include both of his children in his enormous heart. The father waited longingly for his lost son to return home; and when he did he ran, pell-mell, down the road, to embrace his long-lost son, ordering the best robe, sandals on his feet, and the family ring on his finger. And consider how the father deals with the older brother. When he hears that he won't attend the party, he rushes to him, and assures him of his love. The father understands his resentment, his sense of betrayal, and affirms, "*Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*" (Lk 15:31) His love is as strong for the older brother as for the younger. The father wasn't stuck in his resentments or judgments – but kept his heart open, faithful, and afire. Both sons are loved wholeheartedly; treated as family.

Some say this story should be called "The Running Father" – the one who rushes to include both sons. "*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.*" (vs 20) Jesus is teaching that God loves us as a parent for a child. God goes through the agony of worry, and shows a deep love that seeks to protect and shelter us from the dangers and sorrows of this world. God, the "running father" offers us gifts: a robe, a ring on our fingers and shoes on our feet, life, family, home. Jesus came to save sinners, not just the perfect or well off. In his ministry and his teaching, he confirmed that we are all loved by God. We all belong and are welcomed into God's family.

In closing Debra Tannen writes this about her relationship with her mom:

"As my mother aged and her health gave way, our roles began to blur. Whenever she was hospitalized, I flew to her side and stayed, feeding her, pushing her in a wheelchair. Back in her home, when she proclaimed herself too tired to get off the bed and go to the bathroom to wash up, I suggested we dance to the bathroom and hummed a song, knowing she would never pass up a chance to dance." (p. 247) "If you asked me even a few years ago, I'd have said I'd spent my life trying to escape my mother. If you asked me now, I'd say I have spent it trying to find her."

This was certainly true of the Prodigal Son – who lost and then found his parent, and of the older brother who discovered his father loved him in spite of his cruelty. This is true of our relationship with God – who mourns when we reject God's love in favor of the stuff and cash of this world. God's joy is complete when we turn around and come to ourselves and go back to our parent's house, and where life is gift, and not just property. God calls us to return to *bios* – the living gift God's love, and our home where that love lives.

Thanks be to God. Amen.