

# The Prodigal Father

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Luke 15: 11-32

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I love the fact that Jesus told this parable. Some of you may know that I keep a copy of Rembrandt's painting of the scene of this reunion between the prodigal son (prodigal in what he squanders) and the prodigal father (prodigal in his love) in my study. Especially when I meet with non-believers, and they may have picked up a skewed understanding of what God is like, I love to let them know that this is how Jesus understands God.

Think of it: of all the word-pictures Jesus could have drawn to describe God the Father, He chose this one. The God figure could have been driving the team of mythic white stallions pulling the chariot leading the sun across the sky; could have been the conquering military hero subduing all enemies; could have been the earth goddess from whose womb tumbled forth all of creation; could have been the Chief Rabbi who wins the Grand Contest for having best memorized and explicated the Hebrew Scriptures. Instead, we get this wealthy landholder with a healthy desire to welcome his children back into the family and a healthy dose of amnesia.

This being Father's Day, today we'll look at the father figure. In two weeks we'll return to this parable and look at the two contrasting sons to see what each of us might learn about our relationship to God from the Master Teacher.

One further point of clarity before we delve into this parable. Does God always have to be referred to as a man? No. Is God male? No. (In fact, two weeks ago when our local UCC congregations gathered for our Annual Gathering, the Lord's prayer was begun, "Our Father/Mother who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.")

Jesus, the One in whom God has appeared perfectly in human form, happens to have been born a male. (As far as I know, it could just as easily have been otherwise). God created human beings in the divine image, "male and female" created He them—we are all created to reflect the image of God equally. Jesus tells us God is Spirit—without sex or gender. Jesus lamented, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem: How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" [Mt 23:37] He was pleased to compare himself to a mother hen. Jesus prayed to God as His Father, and taught us, His disciples, to pray to "Abba"—meaning not only "Father", but "Daddy". Personal, unthreatening, inviting. "Daddy".

Some hold that Jesus was simply mirroring, unthinking, the "patriarchal" culture of His era, when males were widely thought to be somehow superior. I don't buy it. Jesus did nothing unthinking. Religious culture did not shape Jesus, but rather Jesus shaped religious culture. He challenged the popular religious understanding of just about everything else—He was certainly not too bashful to propose God as heavenly Mother had He believed this. Still—a certain level of respect and humility will help Christ's Church as we envision God so far above and beyond our simple categories.

Let's look at what Jesus' picture of this Father figure in the parable might tell us fathers, and everyone else, about how He understands the nature of God. Two main themes: 1) This Father is not very religious; 2) This Father is very relational.

I The Father is not very religious. He has integrity. He's working. He's managing His business. He's consistent. He keeps showing up. He's there. But He's not religious.

Dads: if you're worried that maybe you didn't provide the religious instruction to your kids you would have liked, or if you're concerned that you may not be able to raise up your children with the Biblical or theological foundation you think important for them, that's not what this parable is telling us. (Yes, I am extremely grateful to Mary Anderson and to each of the teachers who spent Sunday mornings teaching them before high school. And yes, I do wish I had taught my children more about what I believe, and I absolutely believe it is our responsibility as men to step up and teach our children what we have learned—but this parable is saying something different).

God knows any mother or any father with a child or two still at home has his hands full. But if maybe your children are grown and out—or if maybe you were not blessed with children—would you consider praying about teaching the children of others? Men: after a lifetime of learning things the hard way you probably now have a few things you've learned to be able to offer to our youngsters. Wasn't it humbling last week to hear from Jan Shea how dedicated our Sunday School teachers are? And you noticed she said she would be thrilled to have more adults helping out—and more of us men would be especially appreciated because so many women are already teaching our children so well.

Anyway, Jesus shows a different emphasis. We don't know if this father was religious or not—not important. What we do know is that he is a man who owns a significant estate, hiring many servants and able to throw a lavish party to which he invites the entire village. We know he has been a generous man and has treated his slaves with dignity and fairness. (We know because the younger son, when he has reached the far country and buzzed through his fortune and finds himself destitute and starving, trusts that his father pays his slaves enough and treats them well. The son would have no incentive to trek all the way back home only to be mistreated or exploited by a father who is not generous or fair with his employees. Had he seen his father cheat or deal hypocritically he would have pursued a “Plan B”).

We don't know whether the father taught the son his Torah or Bible lessons. But we can infer that the son observed his father's faithful example and generous heart, day in and day out, all the time he was growing up. He knew he could trust his father when his world turned upside down.

Jesus is describing a Father who is not necessarily religious—but who is constant, generous, good-hearted; a father who is available and can be counted on.

Dads: we can do this. This dad didn't have to get A's on parenting or Lamaze classes; didn't have to teach Sunday school. He worked to provide for his family—an innate and noble desire. He set a consistent example for his watching sons. He was there—when his son left and when his son returned. He was there.

How did your father behave when you were growing up? What did you observe? Is it now relatively easy or hard for you now to trust in God? What images or example of your father did you enjoy or endure? Was he kind-hearted and consistent? If he was not a good father, what extra work do you need to do to be able to trust God?

I got lucky. My dad didn't talk much about religious things—so when occasionally he did, I listened. But his example was steady. Our family, all seven of us, went to worship every Sunday, no excuses, no exceptions. He went to work every day when times were easy and he looked for work desperately when times got difficult. He was faithful to my mother and knew that perhaps the best thing he could do for us five kids was to love her. I don't think I ever heard Dad talk about God—but I saw him treat others with respect, and keep his promises to others, and quietly accept his various responsibilities.

One of the things I believe Trish and I have done well for our own excellent children, since “day one”, is to involve our children in church and in worship at least every Sunday. (Well, “day four,” literally; our Katie was born

on a Wednesday and she was with us at worship that first Sunday morning. This shows two things: that my wife Trish is a superstar, and that, fortunately, most cases of paternal cluelessness are not fatal). In our case, anyway, every Sunday morning, whether we were at home or away on vacation, since before they can remember, our now our almost-grown children have always known that people in our family worship God. It's what our family does, and now as they're on their own it's what they do.

Fathers: keep doing what you can do. Don't be overly religious; be consistent; be there. Don't get slowed down by guilt, either: of course not everything goes well with our children. After all, this God-figure in the parable loses both his children: one the dramatic, active, rebellious way and one the passive, “religious” way. Jesus expresses no judgment toward the father even though his younger son was estranged for what may have been years and his elder son may have remained estranged the rest of his life.

The father was not overly religious. For that matter, Jesus was not overly religious. The sinners and the religious leaders were both listening to Him, and the reason He tells this parable, along with two similar ones, is to illustrate to the religious leaders how mistaken they were. They all knew that the “good” and dutiful brother who stayed home, who did not rebel and disgrace the family, should have been rewarded. Somehow Jesus kept telling these stories so that the common people heard Him gladly while the trained religious experts were always offended.

One of the things we enjoy in this church is a healthy aversion to unhealthy religion. I have no desire to judge other people, or how they practice their religion or spirituality. It hurts me to see lives needlessly derailed and people in needless pain because they insist on living apart from the living God who so loves them, but unless people include me it's probably not my business. Jesus saw the crowds of people and His heart went out to them—but He always allowed them “the dignity to fail”; always showed them the respect of allowing them to reach their own conclusions. He allows us to come to Him when we're ready—and He is thrilled.

When dads are not there all sorts of bad things happen, statistically. Children of broken homes with no dad present comprise 70% of the population of state prisons. Children with a single parent at home are twice as likely as those in two-parent homes to drop out of high school. (Recent Time magazine article). According to Dr. T Berry Brazelton, a father's involvement with a child increases the child's IQ, the child's motivation to learn, and the child's self-confidence. There are reams of studies on this.

Fathers, Faith Family: with your own children or the

children of others, be consistent. Be there.

II The father is not very religious; he is very relational.

The younger son goes to his father with a thoroughly insulting request. One surprise is that the father doesn't throw this boy out of the house, or beat him, or both. In that culture based on extreme deference to the paterfamilias, the head of the household, the son tells him to his face, "I don't care whether you live or die; I am more interested in your money than in you, and I demand what is coming to me. I want it now."

The father, with great sadness, divides up his property and gives over his "living" (his "life", literally) to his younger son. The son, full of himself, takes off for the "far country"—Las Vegas or maybe Times Square. He is totally without shame, unrepentant. No thought for his mother or father. Eventually, of course, his money runs out and he finds himself in the gutter. He remembers his father has resources, has a sense of basic decency, and might just take him back. The son now feels he needs to grovel, so he practices. "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son..."

True enough. The only person who seems not to know this, or at least care, is the father. The father would naturally view him as an ingrate, a wastrel, a disgrace to be wiped out of memory and chopped off the family tree. While the boy is still "far off"—he hasn't necessarily changed his attitude one iota—the father sees him. Apparently he has been waiting, looking, hoping, all this time. The dad runs out and embraces his son and kisses him. He throws his dignity to the wind. He looks silly: a grown man running. He's full not of revenge—but of compassion for this lost son.

Before the boy can even get out his rehearsed apology, before he can grovel, the father barks out orders: "bring out a robe: no shabby old thing, but the best one we have: my own good robe!" "Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet!" He is my heir, my son, and these things symbolize he is fully back home and fully restored to relationship. "Kill the fatted calf;" spare no expense, we're going to have a party to end all parties, and we'll invite the entire village. Let's celebrate like there's no tomorrow: He was lost and now is found; my son was dead and is now alive."

One part of loving relationship is to see the potential in the one you love. Are you able to see beyond what your children or others may have done—and to see them in their full potential? Are you able to see yourself apart from what you may have done or failed to do—and to trust that God's verdict on who you are is more binding

than what the world may have been telling you about yourself? If you grew up under a father who found fault, or a mother always wanting more—are you able to trust in God's estimate of you rather than theirs and now yours?

Can you believe God is wanting publicly to come running to receive you, to welcome You home, to call You His own, to overlook what you have or have not done, and to clothe you in his royal robe and to put the royal ring of inheritance upon your finger? Can you believe He is proud to claim you as His child, as you are, this very morning—even before you "get it together"? The resources of the Landowner with all the world at His disposal are available to you: resources for living as totally forgiven, free of guilt or shame. The ability to forgive others, and move beyond bitterness. The capacity to persevere in hard times and to be grateful, to celebrate your covenant commitments, in good times and in bad. What would it take for you to be able to live more according to God's estimate of you and less according to your own?

The father then does exactly the same thing with the elder son who is also insulting him. The father also goes out to meet with him; to restore the relationship. "You have no right to spend all this money on the party for this no-good brother of mine...I refuse to come in and celebrate," pouts the elder son. "I don't care what pleases you and Mom; I don't care what would add to your happiness. I do not approve and I will boycott the feast no matter how it may hurt you." A second time, the father overlooks insulting, boorish behavior. He is willing to incur untold insult as long as his son will come in and join the feast. (What God wants most is for you and me to come in and join His Feast!)

God sees your worth, your beauty, your value long before you do. Long before the world does. It may be that no one else on earth "gets" you or sees what you go through. Still, God is waiting for you, watching for you, running out to you...

This very Father's Day, 2011 somewhere in New England, chances are a father and a son are running again together. At least the father, Dick Hoyt, is running. The son, Rick Hoyt, cannot run. He can only come fully alive, fully enjoy, when his father runs with him.

You see, as Rick was being born, oxygen to his brain was cut off. When he was nine months old the experts told his parents he was brain dead, would be a vegetable the rest of his life. "Put him in an institution," they said. He could not control his limbs or his bodily functions. But his parents noticed how his eyes would follow them.

When Rick was 11 they took him to engineers at Tufts University, hoping there might be some device he could

use to communicate. The dad, Dick, was told, “Forget it. There’s nothing going on in his brain.” The dad said, “Tell him a joke.” They did, and the son Rick laughed. Soon he was rigged up to a primitive computer he could manage by moving the side of his head. It turned out there was plenty going on in his head.

They read of a running race fund-raiser for someone else. Rick Hoyt communicated he would like it if his dad would push his wheelchair—for 6.2 miles. The dad hadn’t run over a mile in 20 years, but for his son Rick he did. They finished next to last, but a few folks encouraged them. It took Rick an hour to tap out one message when they got home: “Dad, when I am running, I don’t even feel like I am handicapped.”

Dick took up the challenge. He began running, and found someone to weld them a suitable chair. They showed up for their first official road race in Springfield, MA, in 1980. Officials hemmed and hawed about it. No matter; they ran anyway—Dick pushing Rick—and finished before half the field, finishing 6.2 miles in 38 minutes. Their obsession continued: training, running, pushing, racing. In April 1981 they lined up for the Boston Marathon. They were not accepted, since they were neither able-bodied nor wheelchair racers. So they ran as bandits, and the father finished, pushing the 110-pound son, in 3:18. The officials were not amused, but the fans were incredibly supportive.

Dick ended up qualifying officially, pushing Rick to a 2:45 marathon finish—which is, by the way, exceptionally fast for any one person. They then entered the Boston Marathon officially, and came to become its most honored participants. Rick would come alive during these races as his father kept powering them forward.

Eventually they were introduced to triathlons—only the dad had never learned to swim. That didn’t last long. In 1985 they completed the Ironman Canada marathon: 2.4 miles of swimming (Dick pulling Rick in a dinghy), 112 miles on a bicycle, and then a 26.2 mile footrace. They have finished the Hawaii Ironman race many times. They have finished a cross-country “Trek Across America”. They are now well known wherever they compete; they have inspired hundreds of disabled persons and families and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to help others overcome limitations. Their YouTube clip went viral in 2006. As one fan put it, “They are the center of the disabled universe.”

The son is now 50 and the father is now 70, and he has suffered heart attacks while training and racing. His body is past having given out. Runners and spectators all across the racing world today know Team Hoyt. Father and son recently finished a local 5K event; “Team Hoyt” was totally surrounded and engulfed. The fans shake hands and hug the men: “God bless you and your son.”

God wants relationship with you. God runs to meet you, to bring you fully alive. God is there for you. One story more...

Ron Mehl tells of the strong young man whose world was rocked—and not in a good way. His young wife had quickly

become gravely ill, and then died, leaving the young man with a wide-eyed, long-haired four-year old little girl. As the funeral service at the church and then the burial at the cemetery ended, their church family was very kind. Several asked him, “Why don’t you stay with us for a while? You won’t want to go back into your home just yet...” The man answered, “thank you for your kind offer, but my baby and I must face this together.”

They returned to that empty, sad little house. Soon enough the night, the darkness, came upon them. The father had brought his little girl’s bed into the room and pulled it close to his own. He heard her continuing to weep, trying to be silent. When he thought she was asleep he himself prayed out loud, “I trust You, Father...but it sure is dark for me now...”

She heard her daddy pray, and she began to cry again. “Daddy...it sure is dark in here. It’s so dark I can’t even see you at all. Through her tears she cried, “But you love me even if it’s so dark I can’t see you, don’t you, Daddy?”

To answer her, the young man reached down and drew her up from her little bed. He put her on his big strong daddy’s chest and held her close until she fell asleep. He began to pray again. “Father, it sure is dark in here. I can’t see You at all. But You love me even when it’s dark and I can’t see, don’t You?”

Luke 15: 11-32

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”