

SHARE OTHERS' JOY  
Luke 15: 1-3.11b-32

Last week I quoted the words from Zephaniah when he told the people: “The Lord your God ... will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” I am quite sure that Jesus knew the writings of that prophet, but in talking about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son, he captured the feeling of joy that a shepherd has, finding a lost sheep and carrying it home; the feeling of joy that a woman has, finding a coin she lost and going to tell neighbors; and the feeling of joy a father had when he opened his arms to his lost son. Today we will pull apart this insightful parable.

First, to understand the parable of the lost Son, one needs to know Rabbinic teaching about family relationships, and one needs to know cultural expectations regarding Middle Eastern villages. No one does that better than Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey in his book POET AND PEASANT. He points out how brilliantly Jesus puts in story form something theological, psychological, and philosophical.

*There was a man who had two sons*

*And the younger of them said to his father, “Father*

*Give me the share of property that falls to me.”*

*And the father divided his living between them.*

The story had two sons because inheritance in those days fell to *them*, and daughters only got the bride price money given to the father of her husband when she married. That’s Middle Eastern and early Hebrew culture. When the younger son, who was not in line to get the rights of a first born, says

“give me the share of property that falls to me” every Middle Eastern commentator agrees that it is the worst of all insults to his father. Bailey asked countless villagers about that verse with these words:

“Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?”

“Never!”

“Could anyone ever make such a request?”

“Impossible!”

If anyone ever did, what would happen?”

“His father would beat him, of course!”

“Why?”

“This request means he hopes his father will die!” [p. 162]

No such request would ever be tolerated by most fathers; *yet this one does*. Also according to culture, the older son would have been responsible for counseling with his brother and standing up for his father in this outrage; instead, you will notice, *even he* doesn’t object to the division of money making the father broke and utterly dependent on the older son! Receiving an inheritance can get petty and vicious among family members even today: imagine asking your parents for your inheritance *right now!* What an insult; what greed; what self-centeredness. **So neither of these sons honors their father;** they indicate lack of respect, failing to honor their father.

*Not many days later, the younger son sold all he had and journeyed into a far country and wasted his property in extravagant living.*

In immaturity and self-centeredness, thinking he was ready to meet the world and he wasn’t, the younger son spent his inheritance foolishly, being unaware of the cost of living in a strange country. *His money didn’t last long, but the Hebrew word for “extravagant or loose” has no confirmed connotation of immorality—only poor spending habits.* The son basically blew his money.

*And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country  
And he began to be in want.*

When famines arise, many persons work for next to nothing, so ranchers could pay very low wages and still have a laborer. The son had lost his money and now had sporadic work; his stomach growled constantly.

*So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country  
And he sent him to the field to feed pigs.*

Joined himself to one of the citizens, means he began to pester and beg for help from a landowner. So how do people in the Middle East try to move beggars down the road? They often assigned them jobs they would despise. What, then, does one do with a well-to-do Jew who has blown his income by reckless spending? Give him a job of feeding **him pigs, of course**. No self-respecting Jew would touch such unclean animals. But this son has lost his self-respect and agreed to do it.

*And he would gladly have eaten the pods which the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything.*

In the Middle East, there were Syrian pods that were sweet and healthy, and sold in many markets; then there were the wild, prickly, and bitter pods that were good only for animal consumption. It wouldn't have killed the boy to eat them, (it would have been pathetic like a person today eating dog food) but in the famine, the landowner gave those pods for his pigs.

*But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's servants  
Have bread enough to spare, but I perish here with hunger?"*

Here *he changes his mind* about being grown up enough to live on his own; he has blown it, deciding to slink home in shame because he has failed at freedom.

*“I will arise and go to my father and say to him ‘Father I have sinned against Heaven and before you and am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired hands.’”*

Sinning against Heaven for a Jew (and a Christian) includes breaking one of God’s Commandments; he had done so. He sinned against his father by his utter disrespect in wishing his father were dead. He no longer could be a son because the villagers would not accept him, and he believed his father has disowned him. He would ask to be a hired hand, which is like an independent contractor of today, not a slave who lived on the property, but one who would live in town and come to work daily in exchange for food and money. In that way he would live and begin to save to make restitution to his father—the only way the villagers would ever forgive him. They would be rough on him anyway since he ran off to live with Gentiles and feed pigs. But a hired hand would put fewer burdens on the owner of his homestead, who by this time realizes how much **his brother resents him!** You see, since the father honored the rash request of the young son, and the older son accepted his inheritance early too, **the father is now living on the ranch only by the grace of his oldest son;** every day is a drain on the eldest’s son’s inheritance. No wonder he has resentment! Dad gave in to the outlandish request of his entitled little brother, who ran off with the money, making the older brother responsible for his father’s living costs and running the farm out of that inheritance!

*And he arose and came to his father and while he was at a great distance, his father saw him and had compassion on him and ran and embraced him and kissed him.*

There is much meaning in that sentence. While the son was at a great distance, perhaps at the edge of the village, a townspeople probably saw him

coming too, calling out his name, and began to form a razzing, taunting mob. This was the practice (and to some extent, still is) in close knit Middle Eastern villages. *They would shun the insolent son.* A father most always wore a robe as a sign of his position, and *he would never run*, out of dignity and difficulty. Deciding to rescue his son from humiliation, however, the father **decides to humiliate himself** by trying to run in his robe to meet his son rather than waiting for him to arrive and explain himself! The father's apparent forgiveness was the only thing that kept the townspeople from mobbing the young man. The townspeople believed they had made up. A kiss from the father was a huge sign to the crowd. But the audience—us—knows that the son *has yet to repent or ask for forgiveness!*

*The son [finally] said to his father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and am no longer worthy to be called your son."*

The son starts his speech but there isn't time for more; the father *has already forgiven him! His joy overflows!* Breathless, he cries out his request:

*"Bring the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet.*

The best robe; certainly one of the father's robes. A signet ring would have restored him to his family, and shoes (or sandals) on his feet meant he was treated as a guest, and not a hired worker.

*Bring the fatted calf and kill it and let us make merry.*

That was a huge sign from the father that signaled his joy too; if he had planned to eat with family alone, he would have slaughtered a goat. By killing a calf, he intended to feed a hundred people: it clearly meant the town was invited *and expected* to honor the father's request and embrace the son. A party was planned as a son was being restored to his family.

*For this, **my son**, was dead and is alive, was lost and is found.*

*And they began to make merry.*

The father calls the prodigal “my son” and names him as alive; he is not disowned or counted as dead anymore. He absolutely offered “amazing grace.” The town folk, who respected the father, honored his request and joined in the party. Only the older son has a major bad attitude problem, not coming to the house as his father asked him to do. The father, then, decided to trudge through the crops to speak to his oldest, humbling himself again.

Not unlike this father, God in Heaven has chosen to humble himself before our global village, showing grace instead of wrath, showing love instead of disdain. *What a story that is; and what a God we have who, in Jesus, took the pain and death that should have been ours.* The arms of God are open for us too, unless we do not realize that we are lost, and instead we turn our back and pout. God wants to welcome us home! In this story, the father felt joy; the younger child felt joy finally too. But the older child never did. Which person most represents you?

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