

SERMON TITLE: "The Scandal of Generosity"

TEXT: Luke 15:11-23

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Yesterday, I enjoyed a wonderful day in Banff reconnecting with a good friend, originally from Manitoba, now living in BC, who I met in graduate school.

Sometime in the afternoon, as we were walking to Johnston Canyon, we got to the matter of sermon topics. When I informed him that we would be looking at the parable of the prodigal son, he said something like, "hmmm, that's a tough one. There is so much that has been said and written over the years about that one. How are you going to find anything new to say?"

I thought about it for a minute, and then said, "Well, I'm *not*."

Because the point of preaching on a parable, or any text of Scripture, isn't necessarily to say something *new*.

The point, I think, is to hear well what these ancient words have to say to us today.

Having said that, I want to say again what I said last Sunday. One of the dangers of familiarity is that we are not, perhaps, as open to being confronted or challenged by the text as we ought to be.

We see what we expect to see.

Some friends of ours have a sliding screen door in the front of their main door. It's a bit of an unusual door that seems out of place. I think I have walked into this door at least three times, even though I know it is there, even though experience has *taught* me that it is there in some very embarrassing ways, even though, when I look carefully, I can see it.

Why? Because I don't expect it to be there.

We see what we expect to see.

We also hear what we expect to hear. I'm going to, perhaps embarrass my kids a little here. Every day, when they come home

from school, Naomi or I usually ask them the question parents have asked children from time immemorial: "How was your day?"

Our kids' response is automatic: a rather uninspired and reflexive, "good."

I've not yet conducted this experiment, but I suspect that I could ask them how their trip to the moon was that afternoon, in the same tone of voice, and at the same time of day, they would respond in the same way: "good."

We hear what we expect to hear.

Our context and our expectations shape how we hear and what we understand Jesus' words to be saying.

In the parable of the lost son, this is often the case. Our context, as 21st century North American followers, affects how and what we hear.

What we often see/hear is an illustration of what individual repentance and salvation looks like, what the character of our God looks like, and what an improper response to God's grace for sinners (embodied in the older brother) might look like.

The moral of the story is straightforward: individual human beings are sinful and turn away from God (like the lost son), God is merciful and welcomes us back (like the father), and we need to be careful that we don't grumble about how gracious God is (like the older brother).

There is a lot of truth in this interpretation, and this is to be affirmed.

But I think that if we do a bit of scratching beneath the surface, we will find that there is more going on in this parable than we might think.

To begin with, we need to remind ourselves of a few things about the context of this parable:

- Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and religious leaders (Luke 15:1-2). It is their "grumbling" about Jesus eating with and welcoming "unworthy" people that leads to these three parables
- **These three parables—and this one in *particular*—are Jesus' direct response to the Pharisees complaint that he was associating with the wrong sorts of people**
- Today, we might not think much of a young man asking his dad for a bunch of money to go on an extended road trip, but in the

- first century, asking for your inheritance would have been a way of essentially saying, "You are dead to me" or "I wish you were dead" or "I want nothing to do with you or your family."
- In a first century Jewish context, you could not sink to lower depths of impurity, uncleanness, and disgrace than to work with and eat the food of pigs.

So, given these contextual details, what do we make of this parable?

One way to move beyond hearing what we expect to hear is to try to imagine what and how Jesus' first hearers would have heard.

How might a group of people who considered themselves to be the gatekeepers of Israel's religious and cultural heritage have heard this story?

How might those whose most basic narrative and national identity included being sent into a strange land, and being led out/back by God have heard this story?

British scholar N.T. Wright makes a very persuasive case that **this parable is, first and foremost, a parable about Israel.**

Remember, the people of Israel found themselves in a strange land due to disobedience as well. The exile into Babylon for disobedience, and the eventual return was a prominent theme throughout Israel's Scriptures.

In chasing after and worshiping the other gods of the nations around them, as happened so frequently throughout the OT, Israel had, like the son in the parable, essentially said to their God, "You might as well be dead; I want nothing to do with you."

Like the son in the parable, Israel learned hard lessons in the strange land of exile, and longed to return home.

Israel's story is the story of the lost son, sinning against his father, living in a strange land, and one day being restored by the father.

But as always, there is a twist.

For starters, Jesus puts these words in the older son's mouth: "I have never disobeyed a single command of yours." Who do you think Jesus might have meant to pay attention here?

The Pharisees were scrupulous in their observance of the commandments, weren't they?

They assumed that they were the "true Israel," staying pure, preserving the law, maintaining the temple regulations, but Jesus' story shuffles things up a bit.

If Jesus is saying that Israel is the son who repents and was restored to the Father, then it seems clear that he is identifying the Pharisees and religious leaders with the older son who resented the generosity of the father.

Even more disturbingly, for the Pharisees, Jesus is portraying them, and their dismissal of the "sinners and tax-collectors" as unworthy, as actively resisting the work of God.

Jesus is putting the Pharisees in an uncomfortable spotlight. He is saying that rather than being the *defenders* of "true Israel" (as they considered themselves to be), they were her *opponents*.

The very people whose complaining about boundaries and markers of appropriate company for observant Jews were exposed in this parable as **outsiders**, those who refused to join the celebration of what God was doing.

Talk about turning the tables!

But, perhaps Jesus was being a little hard on the Pharisees...

Their whole lives had revolved around the law and the Temple, signs of their status as chosen people of God. They were just preserving the traditions, right? How were they supposed to know?

Many of you know that Luke and Acts were originally one volume written by the same author, and there is an interesting parallel between Luke 15 and Acts 15. Luke talks about the birth, life, and mission of Christ, Acts talks about the birth, life, and mission of the church.

In Acts 15, there is a dispute about who is to be allowed into the new church. Some said that observing the Law of Moses (in other words, observant Jews) ought to be a prerequisite for church membership. Others (Peter and Paul) disagreed.

James, in rendering a decision, quotes Amos 9:11-12 which says this:

¹⁶ “After this I will return
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,
¹⁷ that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things’—
¹⁸ things known from long ago.

This ought not to have been anything new for the Pharisees.

Israel’s own prophets had pointed to the day when the reality Jesus was ushering in would be realized.

There had been strong hints, for a long time, that return from exile and the restoration of Israel would be associated with the inclusion of the Gentiles.

The Pharisees were not hearing as well as they could have.

Jesus’ parables always opened the door for those hearing his words to see themselves and their own story in the story he was telling.

They are expansive stories—they are big enough to contain all of salvation history and small enough to contain our own personal stories.

So what about us? Where is our story here, whether as individuals or as a church?

I suspect many of us have, at some point in our spiritual journey, seen ourselves in the lost son. Perhaps we turned our back on God and wanted nothing to do with him.

We need to hear that there is a generous welcome at home for us.

Perhaps we are on the journey back home.

We need to be reminded that the Father runs to greet us, while we are still far off. He doesn’t require a list of how and why we messed up,

and how and why we are sorry for what we are done. He simply wants to welcome us back and to celebrate new life.

Perhaps we have been restored and are living in the peace and the strength and the joy of our Father's house.

Wherever we might find ourselves in relation to "home," the younger son is a model for the possibilities of redemption and hope.

The character of the younger son shows us that no decision we make can put us outside of the reach of God's generous love.

It is also possible that our story could be reflected in the elder son.

Perhaps, rather than finding our way home, we have never left home, and find ourselves grumbling at God's generosity from time to time.

It's easy to receive generosity *ourselves*, after all, but not always to extend it to others.

Perhaps we resent those who are welcomed into the family after a lifetime of destructive and hurtful choices.

More likely, I suspect, we are tempted to grumble about those who don't see things like we do.

The Pharisees had an extremely narrow conception of what "true Israel" was allowed to look like. Is the same true of Christ's church, here in 2011?

It's easy to think that we alone understand what the church should look like, how we ought to understand certain doctrines or passages in Scripture, the posture we ought to take with respect to the broader culture, etc, etc.

It's easy to think that we "get" God better than others.

This week there was an article in the National Post that talked about the rise of religious intolerance. No doubt, recent events in Norway had something to do with this, but the general picture was that in many parts of our planet, people are hardening lines between one another, refusing to consider others' perspectives on God, faith, truth, and ethics.

I had just read this parable before I read this article, and I wondered: Why are human beings so often *less* generous than the God we claim to be defending?

What the parable tells, us is that we can have our rules, guidelines, and lists of things we believe about Jesus and about sin and salvation, about peace and forgiveness, **but** we must never allow our lists to trump the generosity of God.

The parable tells us that the generosity of God is bigger and deeper and wider than the pharisaical approach of quantifying and calibrating religiosity and marking boundaries of in/out, etc.

The parable is a warning to all of us that there is a fine line between defending “true religion” and actively opposing it.

A very fine line.

Because the Pharisees thought they were doing the former (keeping themselves pure, making sure the church was right and holy), but Jesus, through this parable, told them that they were doing the latter.

The irony of the story is that the son who comes home from “exile”—this is the true Israel. The one who simply throws himself at the mercy of his Father—this is the one who is said to move from death to life.

Wherever we find ourselves in the story, there is good news in this parable.

If we have rejected God and wandered away, wasting time and resources that could have been better spent, the good news is that our Father meets us while we are still far off.

There is a generous welcome.

If we have never left home, and have dutifully done our jobs but have perhaps become preoccupied with lists of what we have done and what we deserve for our faithfulness, or if we have spent years studying the correct ways to think and teach about God (!), the good news is that we have a generous father who makes the first move, who comes to us to remind us that new life is **always** a reason for celebration, even

if it doesn't look or sound like we think it should, even if it offends our sense of fairness.

And if we don't find ourselves directly in either of these sons, the good news is simply that we serve a God who is scandalously generous.

We can't out-do God when it comes generosity.

One of the things about this parable that is often commented on is its "unfinished" nature.

We don't know how the older son responded to his father's gentle rebuke, nor, for that matter, do we know how the younger son responded to the party in his honour. We don't hear a word from either one of them after the father speaks the truth to them.

Perhaps, by leaving the parable unfinished like this, Jesus was inviting his hearers to provide the ending themselves.

Perhaps he was leaving the question of how to respond to God's generosity in our hands.

May we respond well. May we respond generously and gratefully to the scandalous generosity of God, and extend it to those around us.

Amen.