

“The Scandal of Love”

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Luke 15: 11-31

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This scripture is part of the teachings of Jesus. One of the ways that Jesus often taught was by telling stories. We call the stories Jesus told ‘parables’. The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the best-known passages of scripture. Jesus told this story to illustrate what the kingdom of God was like. It is sometimes called the Parable of the lost Son because it is in a series of stories that Jesus told. First came the story of the lost sheep and then the lost coin and then the lost Son.

The upcoming Mother’s Day was the furthest thing from my youngest child, Maisie’s, mind when she got philosophical with me earlier this week. She told me that when kids were bad, they were bad because they had bad parents. “Actually”, she qualified, “not the dads—they are ok. It’s the mothers who are always bad”. Happy Mother’s Day everyone! Maisie qualifies for an ice cream cone at Cowans for letting me use her in a sermon illustration!

I have always said that my goal as a mother is to raise my children to be independent and successful enough to pay for their own therapy – therapy that they will need because of my parenting. But I’m pretty sure Maisie did not tell me her theory about why people become bad because she was unhappy with my style of parenting. It took me about 1 second to know where her philosophical comment was coming from. Her favourite movie right now is “The Descendants.”



This is a movie about kids who are the descendants – the children of the Disney heroes and villains. The villains are almost all women and therefore, in this movie, mothers: Cruella DeVille, Malificent, Snow White’s Mother-in-Law. We had a good dinner time conversation about patriarchy that probably went way over her head.

I couldn't help but think how funny we are as a society that we both hold women and mothers up to an impossible standard of perfection – to the point that this becomes a very difficult day if anything is less than perfect and we turn women into incredible villains. Women end up being caught between being mother Mary and Jezebel, with no middle ground. So it's perhaps a little ironic that I ended up choosing a scripture passage with no women whatsoever on this Mother's Day.

The scripture story begins "There was a man who had two sons." We call it the parable of the Prodigal Son, but there are three characters in the story and it is worth standing in the shoes of each of them. It would be an interesting Bible Study exercise to figure out who you are primarily in the story and but also to remember times when you have been like each of the characters.

On the surface you get a picture of the good son and the bad son, but the story doesn't go the way we would expect – it doesn't follow the standard Disney movie plot that we all love -- with the good son being rewarded and the bad son being punished. In fact, as we read the story, all three characters in the story can be critiqued and judged.

The younger son most obviously. He asks for his share of the inheritance before his father was even dead — which was a total insult, akin to saying: *I wish you were dead*. He takes the money and spends it freely — having the time of his life and no thought for tomorrow. Perhaps his living freely might have lasted longer but in one of those beyond-your-control situations, a severe drought or crop failure hits that results in a widespread famine. Things like this are a struggle for those who have diligently saved their money, but for those who have no savings it's devastating. We know something about what that might be like with people living on the edge when a pandemic hits and the job that didn't pay much to begin with is gone. There was no CERB for the younger son.

He ends up doing something that further makes him open for judgement — he works for a pig farmer. Remember pigs are unclean for Jewish people. To live helping to raise pigs is to put yourself outside of Covenant and to live as a gentile. But it's his jealousy of those pigs who have more to eat than he does—he is lower than pigs—that makes him come to his senses.

This is his Rock Bottom. Starving and humiliated, the younger son decides to go home and throw himself at the mercy of his father whom he had hurt and betrayed. He knew there was a good chance that he was coming home to his father's wrath, not love. Of course, his plan was not to come home as a son—there was no way he deserved that. His plan was to come home as a servant or slave.

Most would say the younger son got what he deserved and being a servant or even a slave was too good for him. There is no question that this son gets the brunt of our judgement.

Let's turn now to the older son who has been resenting his brother who left him with all the work. He is self-righteous and wants to call the shots. He is eager to take over and be the father, be the master of the property. The older son would have made different choices than his father. He wouldn't have allowed this situation to happen in the first place. He is angry at his father for foolishly dividing the inheritance so soon and especially for allowing his brother to come home. He is angry at his brother for being so self-centered and irresponsible. He is angry that he is not in control.

But the one we should focus our judgement on is the father. He should know better! How do you raise good kids when you let them walk all over you? He gives the younger son what he wants, perhaps knowing what will happen. Then, when things go badly, instead of saying "Tough luck, live and learn, kid!", *he welcomes him home*. Before the son even gets a chance to properly apologize his father is running (no self-respecting elder runs – children run!) to greet him with the sandals, ring and robe of an honoured son.

His love is foolish, it's scandalous.

Here's the thing. We like things simple and dualistic. We like black or white. Good or bad. Right or wrong. Responsible or irresponsible. Deserving or undeserving. When Jesus lived and taught, the Jewish religion and understanding of God was set within this framework too. You were either righteous or a sinner; clean or unclean; inside the covenant or outside; blessed or cursed, a Mary or a Jezebel. But with this parable and other teachings, Jesus breaks apart that whole understanding and replaces it with a radical and scandalous grace.

The father represents God and the house represents God's house. The father doesn't give the younger son what he deserves; instead he celebrates his return as though the son had come back from a tremendously successful and difficult mission. He welcomes him with open arms, with lavish gifts and by throwing a huge party to celebrate. It is not that he likes the younger son more than the older son — but that the father has enough love and room for both of them.

Remember how we said there were three parables in a row about the lost being found? At the beginning of the chapter, just before Jesus tells the first story it reads: "*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'*" So he told them this parable..." (Luke 15:1-3)

The famous Russian author, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, wrote: "*The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart...even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains...an uprooted small corner of evil.*" You are wise when you can see the enemy at work inside of you instead of seeing it out there in someone else.

Each of us is a judgmental older brother for someone. Maybe it's those who refuse to be vaccinated, or those who repeatedly fall off the wagon and don't work their program, or those who don't volunteer or those who vote this way or that way or those whose lifestyle, race or sexual orientation is different than ours.

And each one of us by times is overwhelmed and, aware of our failings, desperately in need of grace. It's easy to judge and blame people (or their mothers!) for their failings. It is much harder to see our own failings and to love people unconditionally in theirs.

Today is Mother's Day. This is a difficult day for many —grief, estrangement, infertility are so common and even without these, there is no such thing as a perfect mother.

Life is filled with imperfections, yet part of the reason we celebrate this day is because we all long for more of that love that many of us felt first and

