

WHAT FAMILIES LOOK LIKE

Luke 15: 11-32

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In this familiar parable, the first mis-step belongs to the younger son. He asks his father for his inheritance. It was a rude and brash thing to ask. “Umm, Dad, instead of waiting until you die, I could really use that money now!” The second mis-step belongs to the father. He immediately gives in to the son’s request. He doesn’t ask why he wants the money. He ignores the common wisdom of his day which tells people to retain control of their estate. What would we call the son today? Entitled? And what would we label the father? Indulgent? Would we say that he is unable or unwilling to ever tell his child “no”?

A few days pass. Probably the younger son is packing, and the father is waiting and hoping that his boy will come to his senses. He is, undoubtedly, busy selling property so that he could give his child what he promised. But soon the deed is done. The inheritance is divided and given, and the younger son leaves town where he squanders everything. It’s not that the younger son makes a bad investment, it’s not that he falls on hard times, it’s not that he loses a job or has a health problem. No, he deliberately wastes his time and his money. This is the spring break trip that ends in tragedy. This is a long weekend in Vegas that ends in bankruptcy. This is one bad decision after another.

The younger son hits rock bottom. Maybe he could have scraped by, found a job, and eventually been ok, but sometimes there are external factors we can’t control.

A famine hits the land, the economy turns south. He gets a job feeding pigs and hopes to eat what the pigs eat - if that's not rock bottom, I don't know what is. He's starving. Literally starving.

There's no reason to think that the younger son feels sorry for asking for his inheritance, sorry for leaving home, sorry for squandering everything. There's no reason to think that he's anything but desperately hungry. Tail between his legs, he assumes that at least his father won't let him starve and die. He starts the trek home, rehearsing his speech all the way.

How does the father respond? Here's how Luke puts it: "But 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." I don't know any parent who can't relate to this moment. You think you've lost your child, even for a minute, and your whole physiology changes. Your body begins to search frantically while your mind is imagining the worst possible outcome. Or, less dramatically, you pick your child up after that first experience at sleep-away camp, anxious to hear how everything went, surprised at how much you missed her.

And the son says, "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am not even worthy to be called your son." A perfect repetition of what he had planned to say, but before he can finish, dad is in party-planning mode.

Whether the son is sincere or not, the father doesn't care. The father preempts the son from reciting the rest of the script he had planned. He is joyful, he wants to celebrate, and he wants everyone to share his joy.

So far, it's a story about the relationship between a father and a son. But things are about to get messy. The older son has been in the fields working. When he comes toward the house he hears music and dancing. He calls to one of the servants, "What's going on?" "Oh, your little brother showed up. Your dad was so excited he killed the fatted calf." Imagine. Imagine you're the one who's home, all this time. You're the one who sees how worried your father is, how heartbroken at how he's been treated by your sibling. You're the one who's there, trying to comfort him, distract him, keep things normal, pick up the slack. And then, when this happens - when the brother returns - no one thinks to call you in from the field to join the party? The older brother feels ignored and alienated. He stands outside, stewing, sulking, feeling resentful.

Have you been in his shoes? I know I have. A lot of us in this room know what it feels like to be the responsible one. It can make you feel unappreciated, taken for granted.

To his credit, the father realizes that this son, also, needs his care and attention. He allows the older son to vent his frustration and then he says to him this very tender word, "Child." "Child, you are always with me, and everything that is mine is yours." "Now let's celebrate. Our family is back together."

And there the parable ends. With the father and the older son standing outside, listening to the music and dancing. We can picture the younger son inside, stuffing himself with food, indulging in drink, chatting up the neighbors. What will happen next? Will the older son go in and join the party? If so, will he do so reluctantly, with a chip on his shoulder? Or will he find it within himself to celebrate this moment of resurrection joy - the brother who was lost has been found. Or will he stomp off, unwilling or unable

to so quickly embrace this younger brother who has caused the entire family so much pain because of his immature and selfish choices?

When my children were young, there was a popular series of books called “Choose Your Own Adventure.” You would begin a story, and then you would be presented with several options. Take Path A, and then eventually you’re given more choices. Each path leads to a different outcome for the book.

This parable allows us to imagine different endings. Which one would be the most satisfying ending for you? Which one is closer to the way your family works? Does everyone try their best to get along, yet there are underlying tensions which are just bubbling under the surface? Does everyone do their own thing, laughing nervously about the differences that exist?

What I love about this parable is that it seems so real, and so relatable. Of course we all relate to the older son, but I’ll bet most of us have had our younger son moments too, if we think back long enough and hard enough. If we’re honest enough. We’ve made choices that have hurt those we love or made life more difficult for them. And how many of us here have been indulgent like the father, perhaps some would call it enabling?

This is the story of a family like most of ours. There’s a famous quote from the novelist Tolstoy, from his classic novel Anna Karenina. You’ve probably heard it: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Here’s my version: “All families are dysfunctional in their own way.” I worry when I hear people beat themselves up because they don’t think their family is perfect, or maybe you don’t use the word “perfect.” But many people don’t think their family is good

enough. It's so easy to compare what you know of your family life on the inside, with all of your messiness, to what you see of other families, especially the way we portray ourselves on social media.

Every family in the Bible is dysfunctional; sibling rivalry is rampant. Every character in the Bible reveals human imperfections. The message is clear. We are not expected to be perfect, or to have perfect families. If you see a quality you admire in another individual or another family, by all means, notice it and strive to emulate it. There is nothing wrong with self-improvement. But the best self-improvement starts from a place of acceptance, not a place of shame, and be careful of comparing your insides with someone else's external appearance.

At a writer's conference last year, I met a young woman who lives in Kansas City. She has three children, age 7, 5 and 1. She wrote this earlier this year: "I've heard people call this season of life 'the family years.' I prefer to call it 'the blurry years.' If you have a new baby, a baby who's teething, a kid who doesn't sleep, or if someone wakes you up at 1 am to rub her big toe because it hurts, you are living "the blurry years." If you have a kid in diapers, more than one kid who needs help wiping, or any number of children who can't toast their own frozen waffle, you are living "the blurry years." If you hold barf bowls, tie shoes, or have to buckle car seats of any kind, you are living "the blurry years," You have permission to NOT exercise, not have hobbies, not read books, and not "know who you are." You have permission to binge on Netflix shows, boxed macaroni, and caffeinated drinks. You have permission to wear clothes that are "clirty" (clean/dirty), pick your kids up from school in leggings, and put your pajamas on at 4 p.m. You have permission to have ZERO printed pictures of your

youngest child. You have permission to not document on social media when your child meets important milestones. You have permission to not notice when your child meets important milestones. Because, here's the truth. It won't be like this forever. Your children will grow more independent and your life will get less blurry. You have lots of years ahead of you for hobbies and hygiene."

This is what family life looks like. It looks like sibling rivalry, it looks like parents who make mistakes; it feels sometimes like resentment. Perhaps this story of one family from the Bible is encouraging us to recognize that someone we have lost may be right in our own household. Perhaps we are being urged to do whatever it takes to find the lost, and to celebrate with others, so that we can share the joy and so that others will help prevent the one who has been found from ever being lost again. Sometimes in life, we miss out because we wait for an apology that will never come. Don't wait until you receive an apology. Don't wait until you can muster the ability to forgive. Don't stew in your sense of being ignored. Nothing can be done to retrieve the past. Instead, join the party. Celebrate when you can and invite others to join you. Take advantage of resurrection and opportunities for joy, new life and hope. Don't wait for you, or your family, to become perfect. Don't wait for this world to become perfect. Dive into the messiness with all of the grace and love and forgiveness you can muster.

Sources used for this sermon: [Short Stories by Jesus](#), by Amy-Jill Levine and revtiffanybaker.com