

Sample Sermon: “Everything I Have” By Scott Hoezee

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

He had a point, you know. The older brother: he had a point. And if you don't believe that, then maybe it will help to admit that it's a point you and I have made in the past and it's a point we are liable to make again in the future, too. I'm not saying it's a proper or right point to make only that we tend to think this way ourselves and if we can't find a way this morning to deal with that fact, then the impact of this famous parable is probably going to be blunted for us.

Because be honest now: you work with somebody who always seems to get away with murder and it drives you a little batty. She doesn't pull her weight in the office, takes extraordinarily long lunch breaks, and can regularly be heard chatting on the phone to her boyfriend even when she is at her desk. Yet somehow she keeps her job, somehow the boss seems to approve her work, and the rest of you who take 15-minute lunch breaks and put in packed 8-hour workdays just don't get it.

Or maybe it's somebody you know who goes to church same as you do but who manages to be very well thought of in the community despite the fact that he always declines the chance to serve on the church Council, never volunteers for anything, and hasn't been to an evening worship service in a decade or more. Yet you serve as Elder every time the call comes (and it comes exactly every three years as soon as you're eligible again), your family has always been involved at every level of the church's life, you attend faithfully twice each week, and so can't understand why you don't seem to be as well thought of as your slacker friend.

Or maybe it's not somebody you know particularly well yet you are aware that the husband of this one couple never comes to church except maybe on Easter and maybe when one of his kids is in the Christmas program. But every time this couple has a baby—and they keep seem to having them—there he is standing next to the pastor, holding the baby at the baptismal font as though he were Mr. Superstar Christian. And you grind your teeth a little each time and wonder why the pastor doesn't do something about this situation and why your children have to witness such a shabby Christian act as though he's got it all together spiritually.

Oh yes, that older brother: he had a point. He had a point and it's the same point we make about lazy coworkers, slacker church members, wandering sinners who still manage to come out smelling like a rose. The older brother had a point and the whole thing can be summed up in a simple three-word phrase we've all uttered a thousand times: “It's not fair!” That's what it comes down to in Luke 15, but to see how and why, let's review this most famous of all parables.

“A certain man had two sons.” No sooner does Jesus say that and we know what's coming. Something is going to happen between these two sons, and we don't have to wait long to see what that ‘something’ is. The next thing Jesus says is “The younger son . . .” and again, right away, we know that this is the spoiled brat kid, the typical younger child. All the “responsibility” DNA went to the older child. He's Mr. Type-A personality, Mr. Take-Charge, the one who was the target of all the parental anxiety and discipline that we moms and dads tend to gush out onto our firstborn due to our sheer terror of making a mistake as a parent. But by the time you get to the second child (or the third or the fourth), you relax a little. Even as you probably snap fewer photos of the second kid (“Mom, why are there so many more baby pictures of Stephen than of me?”) so you tend to relax a little in other ways, too, and so the younger siblings get away with stuff the oldest child would never had dreamed of getting away with.

It happens. And so while the responsible firstborn son is off somewhere doing something virtuous, the cheeky younger kid—the one to whom Daddy never could say ‘No’ anyway—this younger kid comes up and tells his old man to drop dead. As Middle Eastern scholar Kenneth Bailey has been teaching us preachers for years now, not one child in a million in the Ancient Near East would have ever asked for his inheritance while his father still lived. The only way any father could have made it possible was to become legally dead, to activate his “Last Will and Testament” as though he had died. It was as horrid a thing as any child could do.

Yet this father grants it. He gives the little snot-nosed brat half of the estate. In those days the

inheritance would not have been stocks and bonds and bank accounts but would have mostly been in the form of land, cattle, and other non-liquid assets. The only way this younger son could have made that wealth portable would have been to liquidate his father's cherished estate, which also meant selling off to a stranger part of the precious property that, in Israel, would have been this family's God-given allotment of the Promised Land.

Unsurprisingly, like some fool in a Las Vegas casino, it takes almost no time for this lad to blow the whole wad only to find himself hungover, friendless, and out on the sidewalk. In the blink of an eye he has gone from the wealthy co-heir of a lucrative estate to a rag-tail end of a human being without prospects. Finally the morning dawned when he found his hand sunk wrist-deep in a bucket of hog slop even as he cut his eyes at the pigs as if to say, "You'll get yours once I've had breakfast myself, you little swine!" Well, he'd hit bottom all right but he wasn't ready to be washed up for good.

He was just clever enough yet to hit on a plan he was fairly sure would work. So he engages in a little self-talk (the kind of thing Dr. Phil says is good for us). He grabs himself by his own filthy collar and says, "Listen up, you: Dad has got servants who sleep on clean sheets and eat three square meals every day. Go and apply for the job. And just to make sure, rehearse this line over and over as you trek home: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants."

And so the boy lights off for home. As he travels, he says it again and again and again: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants. Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants.* In fact, with his eyes fixed on the road, he was running through these well-rehearsed lines at the very moment when he suddenly found himself flat on his back, tackled by some bearded old fellow who was giggling like a giddy child. It was his father! He had no idea that old man could run that fast. He'd even lost both sandals, having run clean out of his own shoes. If any of his father's peers from the local Lions' Club had seen this, he'd be voted out for sure. Because at that time respected patriarchs did not run. Not ever. It was the end of dignity and respect to do so.

But his father had just set a new record for the 1,000-yard dash and was even now blubbing with some kind of ecstatic joy and slobbering his fetid-smelling neck with kisses. More confused than anything, the young man blurts out the only thing he can think to say: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." That would have been a gutsy thing for this boy to say in any event but under these circumstances it was less gutsy and more stupid. His father wasn't even listening! He didn't even let him get to the part about being made a hired servant because he was too busy ordering some of those very same servants to put the best robe on the boy (which would have been the father's own robe, which he was probably stripping off that very moment) and to put a ring on his finger and to put on the boy's feet the very sandals he'd just run clean out of.

And then before you could say "Martha Stewart Living" the father had ordered that they lay on a feast fit for a king replete with breaded veal cutlets, steamed vegetables, a fine pinot noir, and the boy's favorite crême brulee for dessert. Curiously, we're never told one single thing about the reaction of the younger son to all this. Did you ever notice that? No words of gratitude are recorded. We receive no interior monologue to indicate that the young boy had converted into a pleasant and grateful son after all. For all we know, he spent the entire banquet quietly clucking his tongue and whispering to himself, "Morris, old boy, you got away with it! You landed with your tail in butter yet again. You gambled on your father's being an old softy and, Ta-Da, here you are!"

Maybe. Or maybe the kindness of his father melted that kind of thinking over the time to come. But we don't know. What we do know is what went down when Mr. Responsibility came in from the fields. He saw cars parked all over the place, up and down the lane and on the front lawn. A catering truck was backed up to the kitchen's back door and he could distinctly hear the sound of the local polka band making merry with accordions and clarinets at full throttle. So he collars one of the servants. "You there—sorry I can't remember your name—but what's going on here."

And that's when he hears the whole story. With gritted teeth and clenched fists, the older boy

stomps away from the house and sits in the tire swing at the far edge of the property. His father was such a fool. Always has been, always would be. Goodness only knows what this party alone was costing, and naturally it was coming out of what remained of *his* share of the inheritance. By the time this shindig was finished, he'd have about \$2,000 fewer bucks to call his own.

The father found this older son of his in precisely this snit. When the boy looked up, he couldn't believe what he saw. There was his father wearing somebody else's cheap robe (he could only guess where the good robe had gone), second-rate sandals, and he had this ridiculous bright-red plastic Hawaiian lei around his neck. "Sheldon, why haven't you joined us yet?" his father asked as though the answer were not obvious.

Before he even knew what he was doing he was saying to his father the very words *he* had been carefully rehearsing for years. Waving a bony finger in his father's face he fairly shrieked, "Look! I've slaved for you my whole life. I've never said no to you, never given you a moment's embarrassment in front of the town elders or your pals at the Lions' Club. Yet you've never given me anything. But now the moment my fornicating, coke-sniffing, pothead brother shows back up, you give him the biggest party this place has ever seen. So excuse me if I can't crank up enthusiasm, Father. You're being taken to the cleaners. Again. It's not fair!"

Can you imagine how this hurt? Yes, it was bad that day some years back when his younger boy told him to drop dead. But this was worse. He at least thought his older boy loved him. But now it turns out he did not love his father because it was abundantly obvious he didn't even *know* his father. Turns out the father had two dead sons, not one; two sons who were not really alive to who he was.

I imagine the father sat down heavily on the grass and with tears in his eyes quietly said, "Everything I have . . . everything I have . . . everything I have has been yours all along. You never did have to earn it. You surely did not need to 'slave away' for it. You didn't even have to ask for it. I thought you were happy here. I thought you knew all along the love that has swaddled you from the first moment I laid eyes on you. I thought you knew that nothing you ever did—or for that matter nothing your little brother could ever have done—would ever have made me stop loving you. I never stopped loving your brother. I just missed him, that's all. And now he's back and I could not be happier. Everything I have, everything, is yours. Why don't you get that? This isn't about being fair or unfair. It's about grace and love. How is it that you never saw that?"

"It's not fair," the Pharisees said in Luke 15:2. "It's not fair that Jesus hangs out with all those sinners and gives them the kind of love he's never shown to us." That's what the Pharisees said and that's what kicked off this triplet of parables about "lost and found." The bottom line of all three stories is joy. Whether God is a shepherd who finds a wandering lamb, an old woman who finds that silver coin that rolled under the sofa, or the father who welcomes home his prodigal son, the bottom line of all three stories is joy. God takes joy in his people all the time. God is a fountain of grace and love that won't quit. And if we really knew who our heavenly Father is, we'd not be the least bit surprised to find him clapping his hands together with glee every time he sees even one of his weaker, less-than-stellar children.

We don't need to imagine ourselves as the prodigal son in this story to understand this. The gospel is here to reveal to us a God who has a laughing face and kind eyes, a God who is neither fair nor unfair but is simply generous in ways that benefit every last one of us. God's prodigal, lavish, hyper-generous grace flows to you and to me, to Christians who work hard in kingdom service as well as to those who can't seem to get their act together, to people we could hold up before our children as spiritual role models as well as to those out of whom we'd rather make a cautionary tale for our kids.

"Everything I have." That line was the kicker in what the father said to his pouting, surly son. And it's the same piece of good gospel news God gives to each one of us. Everything he has is given to us, lavished upon us, through Christ Jesus his Son and our Savior. We've been given the greatest gift ever and we'll never finish exploring its riches and wonders. Why would we ever fret? Why would we ever spend time looking over our shoulders and complaining that so-and-so seems shaky compared to us? Why would we ever worry that some slacker may be getting the same deal? Why does so much of our Christian living get infused with resentment and envy instead of pure joy?

In Luke 15:32 the NIV translates the father's words as "But we *had to* celebrate." We *had to*. That's an interesting way to put it. Turns out that in the original Greek this is the same phrase that gets used elsewhere in the New Testament every time we are told that "it was necessary" that Jesus die on the cross. It had to be this way, we are told over and over again. There was no other way to salvation. "It is necessary," Jesus often said, "that the Son of Man suffer many things and then die." It had to be this way.

But because that had to happen, now what remains is that we have to celebrate! This is necessary. There is no other response that is fitting when you understand who your Father in heaven is. Spoilsports who won't get up off the tire swing to join the party don't understand the necessity to celebrate because neither do they understand the necessity of salvation by grace alone that cut loose all this cosmic party-making in the first place.

Oh yes, that older brother: he had a point but only because he missed the point. Too often we do as well. As with most of his parables, Jesus leaves this story open-ended. We don't know if Sheldon ever went in to join the party. For 2,000 years this story has left the older brother sitting on that tire swing as we collectively hold our breath to see what he will do.

Of course, that's the cleverness of Jesus' story-telling abilities. He leaves it open so that each of us can finish the story in our own lives. The kind father is in the end walking back to the house, that funny red, plastic Hawaiian lei swinging against his chest as he walks back to the party of all joy. If we know who we have become because of God's great gift of grace in Christ, if we know who we are, we will be able to get up off that swing and follow him into the house.

"Hey, Dad, wait up! Since you've given me everything you have, I guess that includes your joy, too. Thanks, Dad. Thank you for the joy!" Amen.