

# “All in the Family”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – September 14, 2025*

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 32:1-7

Luke 15:11b-32

It is such a pleasure to be here with you, today, for this time of holy worship, to share together in singing, in praying, in listening to God’s word as it is read and proclaimed, to mutually discern who we are and where God is leading us, and to experience – in community – the Holy Spirit’s guidance and healing. Jesus, our brother, said that whenever two or three or more gather in his name, there he will also be. And so, this is the gathering of a spiritual family: we are siblings to one another, sons and daughters of the same loving and faithful Creator God.

This morning’s New Testament reading is among the best-known parables of Jesus and one of my personal favorites because it is about families: one particular family, but – in a way, also – any and every family. I come from a family with two brothers, and I am also the father of two sons; all of these brothers – myself included – are very different in personality, temperament, choices, and experience; just like these two brothers that Jesus describes: known here only as elder and younger, first and last.

We are told by Luke in the opening verses of this chapter that Jesus shares a set of three parables because the Pharisees and scribes in his audience object to Jesus’ regular and intimate association with the so-called “sinners and tax collectors.” The Jewish leaders don’t seem to think this is a very wise use of his time or energy; perhaps, they are even a bit jealous?

This parable of the Prodigal Son – also sometimes called the Parable of the Father’s Love – introduces us to the younger son who asks for his inheritance and squanders it, and then to the elder son who works seemingly like as a slave and receives no credit. These vast differences between the brothers draws us, as listeners, into the tension between them.

- The younger son travels to some distant land; while the elder son remains home.
- The younger son indicates he is no longer worthy to be called a son and asks to be made into a servant; the elder son describes himself as having slaved away and receiving nothing in return.

- The younger son is made the guest of honor at the party; the elder son learns about the party by accident, not by invitation.
- The younger son is dead and then alive, lost and then found; the elder son has always been with the father but doesn't get that all the father has is also his.

In the ancient world, as today, an inheritance typically would be received only at the death of the parent. Therefore the younger son's request basically means, "Dad, I wish you were dead!"

When the younger son leaves home for a faraway country, he distances himself from his father and older brother not only geographically, but also psychologically. He is declaring, in short, that he is done being with his father and all others in the household.

When the younger son comes into difficulty, he becomes a servant of a farmer in a foreign land. The latter is a Gentile; we know this because he has a pig farm. The son is indentured, working for a set number of months or years. Feeding pigs would be, in itself, bad enough for a Jew, but to consider joining the pigs at the trough is to add degradation upon shame.

The parables of Jesus are almost always marked by some element of surprise. What is maybe most shocking, here, is the behavior of the father. Not only does he grant the wishes of the younger son, no questions asked, he also – without knowing the reason of his return – runs out to meet the prodigal, adorns him with new clothes and jewels, and arranges for a lavish feast of celebration.

And, lest we forget, the father then crosses the threshold a second time; he leaves the party to go and invite the elder son to come and join the celebration. The elder son wants no part of it; he seems to resent the generosity of his father as much as the sudden reappearance of his brother. He feels taken for granted, and like they have both been taken advantage of; the elder son can't appreciate that all his father has (at least what remains after his younger brother took and squandered a part of it) has always been his.

So, to recap: Number Two Son asks Dad for a handout, skips town, squanders away his inheritance, and decides to come home only when he runs out of options. Number One Son never shirks his responsibilities and does everything his father asks of him, but resents his father's generosity and all the attention being showered upon his younger brother.

Which son needs to repent? Likely, both. Which one deserves to feast on the fatted calf? Probably, neither. And yet, both are invited to join in the celebration.

One of the reasons I like this story – beyond its focus on the rich relationships between siblings in families and therefore, also, among spiritual siblings in congregations – is that it doesn't come to a tidy conclusion. Instead, we are left to wonder whether the elder son changes his mind and comes to the party; whether the younger son changes his ways and reconciles with the family he so quickly abandoned; and how a father can continue to act in such a surprisingly gracious manner.

This is because, most of us – I believe – can identify with at least some aspects of all of these characters. There are times when we have behaved like the prodigal: running away from – physically or, at least, in our minds – the relationships and responsibilities that are put before us; we have each squandered resources and opportunities, placing our own wants and needs above those of the ones we eventually realize we love, and need.

We can, also, identify with the elder brother: the one who was loyal and faithful, who followed the rules even when others appeared to be gaming the system, or cutting corners, or manipulating others. We know that feeling of resentment – of looking at others who seem to have it easier than us, who are always given yet another chance – and it churns within us into jealousy. We compare ourselves to others and fail to appreciate what is already ours.

And, whether or not we, ourselves, are blessed to be parents, we know something about what this father endures. It can sometimes feel foolish to give generously and then sit around, hoping, to get something back in return; to needlessly compare children to one another, saying: well, this one stayed; that one calls; this one shows or expresses thanks. Hearing about this father running out to meet his prodigal younger, then pleading with his resentful elder; it just makes us pray that all might know they are welcome, loved, and invited; and, thus, will find their way into the celebration.

Because, in the end – as much as this parable is a story that we can relate to in our own lives, with our own families, and in this world in which we live – it may be more important to our understanding of relationships in a whole different realm. In Luke's gospel, just before telling this parable about a father's love, Jesus told those two other stories – one about a lost sheep and another about a lost coin; saying that, when that which is precious and lost is found – there is reason for celebrations on a scale that is beyond anything we could expect or imagine.

So, maybe that is what this particular story – about this particular and privileged family of a father with two sons – is trying to tell us. Maybe the lesson is that whenever someone is lost and then found, or presumed dead and then shows up alive, or resentful of what others have been given and then reassured that everything is already theirs;

whenever the Father's love shows up in surprising abundance, it is a cause for celebration.

And as the scriptures tell us, we know what love is because God first loved us. This love can take the form of forgiving someone who has wronged us or gone down the wrong path; or, it can be love that runs to welcome those who may feel they do not belong. Love might also mean reaching out to those who feel angry or resentful, reminding them that because they are loved by God, those feelings need not be a barrier to experiencing the love of others. Love can, likewise, be for a planet that has been neglected, or for the creative arts that bring forth greater beauty. Or, love can be sitting with or standing alongside someone so they do not feel so alone. Love can be providing the space or resources that make life's celebrations possible.

So often, it seems, we misunderstand God's gracious love. We think we can manipulate or earn it; we believe it should exclude those who don't act in ways that we deem appropriate or moral or prudent. But, if that were true, it would not be grace; it would not be the self-giving, never-ending, unmerited love that is revealed to us through Jesus Christ. As the saying goes, the grace of God is not cheap, but it certainly is free.

Families we are born into, those we gain or choose along the way, those comprised of sisters and brothers in faith that may share common congregational, denominational, or regional labels – these bonds and homes that we share are beautifully complicated. We often struggle to understand when members leave or come back, when they make outrageous demands or shirk responsibilities, when they run out to meet us or stew over old bygones, when they hold onto grudges or graciously forgive. And yet, we always and forever exist within such complex and wonderful relationships. We are members of shepherds' flocks, coins of a common treasure chest, and siblings with one another in shared households.

The message Jesus is offering to these jealous and angry Pharisees and scribes – in these three parables – is that they are not being harmed by others being graciously welcomed; they are all being invited to the party; and all that belongs to the Father is already theirs.

So, let us give thanks that, this day, God has brought us into community, to be with our fellow sons and daughters of the same loving God; that we have been blessed with this space and opportunity to lift up our voices in song; to share common resources in the mission of serving and healing the world; to feel the welcome and care of these, our family members; and to pray that love would also find those who are not with us now, but whom we also care for. All thanks be to God. Amen.