

The Parable of the Negligent, Irresponsible, down-right Ridiculous Father

Luke 15:1-3, 11^b-32

You've heard this story before, right? It's not a new one . . . so you know by now what the word 'prodigal' means? Well, it means 'wasteful' or 'reckless' or 'extravagant' or a combination of all three. And, even though we know this story best as the Parable of the Prodigal Son you know by now that it's not really about the son . . . and sometimes we forget there's two sons . . . it's really a story about the father. The great German theologian Helmut Thielicke called it the Parable of the Waiting Father. Personally, I think a better title would be the Parable of the *Prodigal* Father.

I remember being in a bible study once with a whole bunch of other pastors discussing this story. There was one bloke who hadn't said much, he was just sitting quietly listening to all of our theological wisdom . . . finally he piped up and said, "I reckon this is a story about a wimpy, co-dependent father who can't handle conflict"!

Well, that stopped the conversation! We all looked at him . . . shook our heads and smiled . . . nice try, but we're talking about God here. And, we know about God, don't we?

A wimpy, co-dependent father who can't handle conflict. At least that got us thinking . . .

Who is this father . . . in this story?

Well, certainly not someone you'd go to for parenting advice! What was he thinking?! His kid comes to him . . . the younger one . . . and demands his share of the inheritance. What a nerve! Of course, the son *assuming* he's in the will . . . he's got a share in the inheritance! In the culture of the day it's as good as saying to the old man: "I wish you were dead"!

Of course, the appropriate response to a request like that is a hearty laugh and a good clip around the ears . . . if he's lucky. But, what does the father do? He goes ahead and agrees! He divides up all he has and hands it over . . . and not just to the younger son, but to the older son as well! What kind of father does that? How irresponsible! How's the boy going to learn? Being rewarded for his disrespect! What that boy needs is a bit of discipline. What that boy needs is some boundaries. What that boy needs is to know there are rules . . . there are ways . . . there are processes . . . there are traditions . . . what that boy needs is a father to teach him to be a responsible, respectful citizen. But, what does *this* father do? He gives in . . . and he gives up everything he has . . . everything he has worked his whole life for . . . everything . . . he gives it to this selfish, childish, disrespectful son! That stuff is not in the parenting manual . . . then, or now! What kind of father does that?

And, it gets worse! A few days later the little brat packs up and he's off . . . with all his father's stuff! And, the father says nothing! He doesn't even try to stop him . . . talk some sense into him . . . keep him at home until he's grown up a bit. No, this father lets him go . . . knowing that he's immature . . . knowing that he's going to waste it all . . . knowing that he won't survive in the real world . . . *not* knowing if he'll ever see his son

again . . . knowing that for all intents and purposes they will be dead to each other! The father lets him go . . . allowing his son to go to his death. What kind of father does that?

And, surprise . . . surprise . . . one day, the son comes back . . . tail between his legs . . . tired, hungry, desperate. We knew that was going to happen! And, this father shamelessly runs out to meet him . . . to greet him with open arms . . . no questions asked . . . and throws a party for him! Not just that, he goes all out . . . over the top . . . the best robe . . . which probably now belongs to the older son! . . . there's music and dancing . . . the finest ring of the household . . . the fatted calf is killed . . . like this kid is some sort of royalty . . . like this kid should be rewarded for his behavior . . . was this stuff even the father's to give away anymore? But, he does it, anyway! Hardly a great way to maintain a positive family dynamic when the other son has been diligently working away, supporting the father, doing the right thing, sticking to the rules. Seems like a sure fire way to create jealousy and division. What kind of father does that?

A wimpy, co-dependent father who can't handle conflict? Well . . . maybe.

But, did you catch who this story is told to? It's told to the Pharisees and scribes. The ones who knew the law . . . who knew the rules . . . who knew the Scriptures . . . who knew about God . . . who were so sure they knew what God was like. It's told to the scribes and Pharisees who were grumbling about a certain son who 'welcomed sinners and ate with them' . . . a certain son who was playing fast and loose with the things of God . . . a certain son who needed to be put in his place . . . and if his own father wouldn't do it, they certainly would . . . if was for his own good! I mean, what kind of father brings his son up to be like that?

A wimpy, co-dependent father who can't handle conflict?

Or . . . a father who is willing to risk . . . to risk losing his possessions, but that's just the start of it . . . to risk giving freedom to one he knows can't handle freedom . . . to risk losing his standing in the community . . . to risk being made to look like a fool . . . to risk loving and not being loved in return . . . to risk being rejected . . . to risk losing everything . . . but, most of all, to risk losing his son. This is a father who takes risks . . . because this is a father who loves and loves deeply. Love is a risky thing.

You see, this father just doesn't love his younger son . . . he also loves his older son just as much. The father knows the rules, he knows what society says, he knows how he's *supposed* to act, and, he does act . . . but this is a father who can see beyond the rules . . . who can see beyond the jealousies and self-righteousness the rules produce . . . this is a father who loves those who are bound by the rules . . . who loves those who insist on enforcing the rules . . . this is a father who embraces his older son and gently invites him to see life beyond the rules . . . to see the *joy* of life beyond the rules.

Because, most certain of all, this is a father who is full of joy . . . this is a father who rejoices above everything else . . . this is a father who seeks the joy in life . . . who finds the joy in life . . . even in the face of death . . . even when everything he has has been given away. This is a father who rejoices most when the dead come to life . . . this is a father who rejoices most when the lost are found . . . this is a father who rejoices most when all his sons and daughters come home.

Now, I ask you . . . what kind of father does that?

Amen.

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