

**Laggan and Newtonmore
Parish Church of Scotland**

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Be what you are

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Luke 15:11-32

This is the parable that got away from Jesus. It began as one of a trio of short stories to show God's delight and the delight of heaven in people repenting, turning to God and to God's ways, which are the ways we were created to live, what we were meant to do and be. It began that way, following the lost and found sheep and the lost and found coin. This is the story of the lost and found son. That was what Jesus set out to tell. But this story, maybe because it is not about sheep or coins, but about people, and people are interesting and complicated and people are why Jesus came and what he was passionate about, this story got away. It grew legs and took off. It developed more than one focus: not just the son, but also the father and the elder brother.

And as we read this story, we might identify with the son who was lost and found, but we might identify with the father who lost and regained his son, or with the dutiful but unlikeable older brother. So what we are going to do today is think about this story from three different points of view.

Let's start with the older son - since he is usually left till last or even forgotten, as his bit comes at the end of the story, almost as an afterthought. I am sure he is not an afterthought as in unimportant, but maybe as Jesus was telling his story he began to wonder what the story of the younger brother would do to family dynamics. None of us is an island, and what happens to one member of a family - or a church - or a group - affects the rest. The older brother's story goes something like this.

Life on the Judean farm was not what anyone would call exciting. It was hard work and daily routine, punctuated with Sabbath rests and seasonal holidays and festivals. But most days were very similar, consisting of work and more work from dawn till dusk, and then bed. But the older brother didn't mind. He didn't think about the monotony, or resent the sameness, because that was what life was like, had always been like and he had no

thought that it should or could be different. He was grown up and that was his life.

Until the day when his younger brother, who was always restless, demanded that his father give him his share of the property now, without waiting until it came to him at the normal time, after a death. What amazed the older brother was that their father agreed to this outrageous request. He gave his younger son what he asked for, gathering together the money he had by him, and even selling some livestock in order to get the value of the land in cash, to hand over. And for the first time the elder son began to wonder about his life. What would his father do if he also asked for his inheritance now, in advance? Would he, could he give it to him? He thought not.

Off went to younger brother, and soon back home came the rumours. The elder brother watched his father sigh and frown over tales of infamy and profligacy on the part of his wayward son. He saw how his father would stand, so often, looking down the road where his youngest had disappeared. He saw his father grow grey of face as well as of hair, and saw his eyes become so tired with worry.

And then one day when he had been working far from the house, he returned at sunset and he saw that the lamps were lit and that there was a great noise of laughter and song coming from windows and open door. He called to a slave to ask what was going on, and of course he heard the news, that his brother had returned and had been greeted not with anger or rejection, but with a party. And you know the rest. He would not go in. He accused his father of favouritism.

His father assured him that there was no favouritism at work here, but we are not told if his elder son believed him. Did he thank his father for the constant love and care given him, and join in the welcome to his prodigal brother, extending grace, not disapproval? Did he show himself the true son of a forgiving father? Or did he stalk away with his head in the air, and so break his father's heart all over again?

Maybe you can see yourself in the elder son. Maybe yours is the story of someone who grew up in the church and who has never strayed from regular worship and helping. Maybe you were taught, or assimilated the idea, untaught, that there were those who were beyond the reach of God, or behaviour which must be shunned, even though that means shunning your own brother or sister. And how do you feel when you see the church, on God's behalf, give a welcome to those who have not shown your constancy, and who have not lived your blameless life? Can you join the

party, glad that they have come to see that there is a better way, or can you not forgive them for what they have been and done?

Reading: Matthew 7:1-5

The second figure is the second son, the younger, the prodigal. We know his story. We recognise him. The restless young man, discontented with his routine life, seeking change and adventure before life passes him by. The naive innocent who is unable to budget and plan, who is easily taken in by the lures of the world. He doesn't know the pain he has caused his father. He doesn't know the resentment building in his brother. He probably doesn't even realise that rumours of his wild life have returned to the quiet family farm.

But, and this is what his brother does not know, even as these rumours sicken his family, so his reality sickens himself. He learns to look at himself and see the truth that he had been running from: that the life with his family was the best life. He learns that the glamour of life without rules and patterns was empty. That he has frittered his inheritance and deserved no more help. Life with the pigs was life that told home truths, and having no distractions, he learned to listen.

So back he trailed to his homestead, reluctant, repentant, expecting nothing, but hoping for the chance to work for a living wage. Back he came and was astounded when his father ran to meet him, kissed him, made a fuss, and threw a party. He wasn't even allowed to get through his planned apology and petition before he was being drawn back into his old place, the place he was born to fill, as a child of the family.

Over the years many, many people have identified with the lost and found son. Jesus told the story because he knew that there were (and are) many lost children out there, who feel that they have blown it and lost their chance or their right to be happy, welcome, loved and fulfilled. And Jesus knew that they were and are and always will be wrong. Because God's love is not a matter of deserving or of rights, but of grace and gift and hope.

Reading John 6:37-40

Our third character the pivotal one in this story, the one this story is really about, is the father. The father who loves his sons. No one who has not been a parent can know what a parent's love is like. Our children growing up will never know how much and in what way they are loved until they have children of their own to love. This is part of the world-changing revelation of parenthood: that just as you love this new life given into your care, so you have been loved in your turn. Maybe it is not a bad thing to

remember this on Mothering Sunday. And not understanding this, we hurt our parents, earthly and heavenly, over and over, sometimes callously and so often without being aware of how and how much we do this.

Did the younger son know how he must have hurt his father by demanding his inheritance? Did he realise that he was in effect saying, "I wish you would hurry up and die."

Did he know how hard it may have been to gather half the money together, when a lot of it was vested in the property? Or did he just think about his own selfish wishes?

And the elder son. Did he value his father's presence and direction and approval? Did he think how grieved his father must have been to know that his dutiful son was just that, dutiful. He did his duty, but he hadn't absorbed the love and grace and forgiveness of his father's nature. That must have hurt as much as the reckless squandering of the prodigal.

The father had the hardest part in this story. But after all it is a story about how God's heart rejoices over his erring children when they repent. And the grace that he gives is not a cheap grace. He had allowed his sons to hurt him. He had known the agony of longing for his youngest and of having to hear news of him going to the bad. And even in the moment of celebration and relief, he had discovered the grudge at the heart of his eldest. But this is a story of God's grace. It is a story of how God never gives up longing for us to return to him when we go astray. It is a story of how God longs for us to live with his love and mercy and grace shaping our relationships with others. It is a story that says, you are part of the family of God and so no matter what, you are loved.

May we, prodigals or dutifuls, learn to allow the love of God to wash over us, so that, even though it cost us and sometimes makes us sad, we too may live with that love, that acceptance, that grace with others. May we learn to let the love of God wash over us, so that we may learn to be true children of our heavenly Father.