

Outrageous!

Families. You've got one. I've got one. Everybody comes from a family. Moms and dads. Brothers and sisters.

Take a moment. Think back to the way things used to be in your family when you were a kid. Or maybe back to the way things were when your own kids were little. Remember the kinds of things that siblings think about each other and often say about each other. Things that might sound kind of like this:

His piece of cake is bigger than mine! She always gets her way! He gets to do everything he wants, and I never get to do anything! I always have to do more chores than she does! You love him more than you love me. I'm going to run away from home! Any of these strike a chord?

All these long-ago feelings have played a role in shaping the adults that children grow up to be. Have played a role in shaping the people that *you've* grown up to be. Some of these issues may still be with you. They're not all of who you are, but they are a part. They're the dynamics of your family.

And maybe they're also the dynamics of the family in the parable we get to hear Jesus tell today. Jesus begins: *There was a*

man who had two sons. It's such a familiar story. We know—at least, we think we do—where it's going. But do we understand why Jesus offers this parable in the first place?

Luke wants to be sure we know that the first hearers of this story were Pharisees and scribes. Religious leaders. Churchy types. Upright. Prim and proper. And maybe more than a little holier-than-thou. They've been watching Jesus. And they *don't* approve of the kind of people he's associating with. Because Jesus hangs out with those on society's fringes. Riff-raff. Tax collectors. Prostitutes. Partiers. Disreputable types with decadent lifestyles. And Jesus actually sits down and *eats* with these sinners. Shares the intimate bond of table fellowship with them. Now really! How totally inappropriate! The scribes and Pharisees mutter and murmur among themselves. But Jesus sees their indignation.

So he tells them this story about a young man, his older brother, and their father. Though we've heard this ancient tale many times, if we listen anew, we may discover it still has power to astonish.

Now the younger brother in this family hasn't exactly distinguished himself as a model son. He's probably not the first kid—or the last—to request his inheritance early. But by demanding

his share of his father's wealth while his father's still alive, it's just as though he's saying to his father: *As far as I'm concerned, you might as well be dead.* That gets our attention! But the request is granted. And with cash in hand, off he goes. You know what comes next. Carousing. Revelry. Debauchery! There's only one way to describe this son's behavior. Outrageous!

But at about the same time dad's money runs out, that far country he's gone to runs out of food. Alone and broke, the only job he can find is slopping a Gentile's pigs. For a Jewish boy, there's no greater humiliation.

He's starving. Cold. Dirty. In the muck of the pigsty, he figures it out. Maybe what motivates him isn't remorse so much as self-preservation. *If I confess to the old man, if I say that I've sinned, that I'm not worthy to be treated like his son, if I ask to sleep in the bunkhouse with the help, at least I'll be fed.* And so this prodigal heads for home.

What happens next might just be our favorite part. But it doesn't shock us the way it must have shocked long-ago hearers. Because no self-respecting Middle-Eastern patriarch would have behaved the way this father behaves.

He doesn't disown this rebellious offspring. Isn't that what he deserves? This father doesn't turn his back on his son. Instead of turning away, this father turns his face *toward* the direction his son was heading when he left. This father's been waiting. He's been watching. Training his eyes on the road as it bends into the distance.

And when at last he spots the far-off, yet unmistakable figure of his boy approaching, he does something incredible. He runs out to meet him. Now please understand: first-century fathers do *not* run. Other people run to *them*. Running is *so* beneath their dignity. The neighbors would think it outrageous!

Well, this *particular* father doesn't give a hoot *what* the neighbors think—even though everyone in the village is standing around whispering. Maybe even looking forward to seeing this young upstart get what's coming to him. But their jaws drop at the sight of this compassionate father running, running, stirring up clouds of dust, long hair streaming out behind him, robes flapping in the breeze. Watching him welcome and kiss and throw his arms around this child who was lost and has been found.

You know, I think this portrait Jesus paints for us is one of the Bible's most beautiful images of God. Of God's redeeming love and God's abundant grace.

But wait a minute. The son hasn't even gotten out the words of his rehearsed confession speech before his father forgives him. Do you think this father and son have it backward? Isn't repentance supposed to come *before* forgiveness? If someone wrongs us, aren't they supposed to have to say they're sorry *before* we forgive them? That's the way we human creatures order the world. But that's not the way God works.

For it's grace—sheer grace—that in this moment of reconciliation makes the young man's confession genuine and his repentance real. That's the power of God's grace. Knowing that such an amazing gift is yours—not because you're worthy—but because grace is poured out on you. Grace that always comes *before* the inner turning that we call repentance.

Grace that welcomes a prodigal back into the family. Grace that bestows an elegant robe and a gold ring and new sandals. Grace that accepts him as a son. Grace that invites him to be guest of honor at a great celebration. You can already hear the musicians tuning up as the father joyfully shouts: *Let the party begin!*

And it does. Father and son disappear into the house together.

But Jesus isn't yet finished telling this parable.

The late afternoon sun's sinking into the horizon. It's quitting time. And this is when the older son shows up. The one who's been toiling all day. The conscientious, diligent, dutiful one. The one who's played by the rules. The one who hasn't had much fun. All this time younger brother's been off squandering dad's money, older brother has stayed around the home place, *making* money for dad. Making a go of the family business. Laboring long and hard.

But through the open window of the house, older brother hears music and laughter. Inhales the tantalizing aroma of a feast saved for the most special of occasions. This isn't a polite little drop-in for a few close friends. No—his father is throwing a full-scale, blow-out bash for the entire community! The whole village is inside. Dancing. Dining. Drinking. And also inside is younger brother. The rebel. The wild child. The black sheep.

The one who's broken all the rules—and broken his father's heart—has now been *forgiven*? Outrageous! Older brother is incensed. Irate. Infuriated!

And once again, the father in this story does something most men of his hospitable culture wouldn't *dream* of doing. He leaves his guests in the house! And goes out to invite his older son.

Who retorts: *It's not fair! I'm the one who deserves this party. All these years, I've been faithful. But this son of yours? After everything he's done, you've welcomed him. You're feasting with him. He doesn't deserve it! How totally inappropriate!*

My sisters and brothers, this firstborn son is the one our parable's *really* about. He's the mirror Jesus is holding up to scribe and Pharisee. And he's the mirror Jesus is holding up to the church today. The church that sometimes gets its nose out of joint when sinners show up.

In Jesus' story, this older son is the one missing out because it's so hard for him to accept that someone he judges to be undeserving is receiving the gift of his father's grace. Sadly, he refuses to acknowledge that between him and his father, between him and his brother, there is family *relationship*.

But this father is all *about* relationship. With the love in his heart written all over his face, this father continues to plead with his son to come inside.

And that's where Jesus the storyteller stops. His parable doesn't have an ending. The older son stands outside in the gathering darkness, just as lost as his brother was. Just as lost as his brother was.

He's been invited to the party. Where joy awaits him. Joy is in the house. Joy is so close. Joy is just a few steps away. But no one can take those steps for him. He has to take those steps himself.

And so do all of us who have within us something of this older brother.

We can't receive grace ourselves until we can celebrate grace being poured out on others—not based on a system of merits, not because they deserve it—but because of God's limitless love for all God's children.

For God loves each one of us with a tender love. God loves each one of us with a never-ending love. Sometimes we wonder why. Every one of us has fallen short. Every one of us has sinned. Every one of us has separated ourselves. Every one of us has sojourned in a far country. Every one of us travels the long road back. Every one of us stands in need of grace, of the prevenient grace that always comes before we repent with tears and gratitude and fall into the encircling arms of the One who's waited for you and me.

For this is my story. And this is your story. Regardless of your actual birth order. Regardless of whether you discern in yourself something of that younger sibling or—perhaps—something of the

older one. Or even if you recognize in each of them a part of yourself in various seasons of your life.

This is your story because your Father comes out to meet you. Welcomes you. Embraces you. Forgives you. And invites you to a party. Not just *any* party. A party to *end* all parties. A party with laughter and merriment. A party with music and dancing, with feasting and singing and rejoicing.

Today we receive a wondrous foretaste of this great banquet. Today another Son offers himself to us, and today we eat and drink and are filled with him. Because his extravagant Father, his prodigal Father gives it all, gives everything, even a precious, precious only Son, so that you and I will experience the joy and the celebration that await us when we go home. Home to the outrageously amazing party God's throwing for every one of us sons and daughters: members—all—of the family of God.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.