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# “Giving Up Pride”

Luke 15:11-24

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Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'

So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' "

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let's eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is

*alive again; he was lost and is found!*

*And they began to celebrate.*

Luke 15:11-24

If someone asked us to name ten celebrities, we could do it: Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, Rihanna, Tom Cruise, Adam Sandler, Harrison Ford, Johnny Depp—is Johnny Depp still a celebrity? What about Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton? Do they count as celebrities? Naming celebrities is easy. We could name ten celebrities who live in Brooklyn.

If someone asked us to name our personal heroes, people we admire and want to be more like, that would be harder. After a while we would come up with a few—parents, grandparents, teachers, mentors—people we respect. Most of those people are not famous.

When we compare what celebrities are famous for, and what our heroes are admired for, the difference is striking. Some people's fame is far bigger than the gifts for which they receive their fame. Some people's worth is far bigger than any glory they receive.

But even so the longing for fame trickles down. We do not have to be famous to want to be well-known, well-liked, approved and applauded. Most of us like the spotlight. We like recognition. We want the little merit badges and trinkets of our profession, whatever perks we can get that come with being important.

We want to feel superior, to divide the world into us and the people who are not as important as we are. We ask, "What do you do?" and then make a quick judgment

on their occupations. We say, "That's a great job" or think "That's not impressive." We ask, "Where do you live?" and think, "That's an excellent neighborhood" or "That's a little shaky." "Where did you go to school?" That is better than my school or that is not as good as my school. "Where do your kids go to school?" My kids win, or uh, oh.

We like to think we are winning. When we are wearing something new and flattering, someone needs to point out that we look good. Someone needs to notice when the kitchen is particularly clean, or we have lost ten pounds. Wanting to be thought well of does not seem dangerous, but we spend too much time keeping up appearances, trying to impress people with qualities that we do not have and that do not really matter.

We ignore things that are important. We listen only to our own ideas. We go days without doing anything truly unselfish. We become so self-consumed that we drip negativity. We gravitate to pessimistic ideas, dismal viewpoints, and the gloomiest visions of the future. When we are looking only at ourselves, we are not looking for goodness, the people we love, or even our own best selves.

Every time we go it alone, we leave the path that leads to love. Wanting approval distances us from others. Relationships cannot flourish when we use people as sources of flattery, as the background against which we can shine, or as useful props in our reputation-building program. Arrogance isolates us. Impressing others usually requires hiding ourselves, as much as it involves showing ourselves off.

Turning inward, praising ourselves, and seeking praise stunts our growth. The desire for the approval of others is

crippling. Managing our own reputation leads to self-preoccupation. We either take too many selfies or feel superior to the people who take too many selfies. When our dominant pronoun is I, we miss out on the best life. Pride goeth before a fall. Sooner or later an overly inflated ego will trip us up, and we will land flat on our face.

Good looks and athletic prowess fade with age. The fashions of the day are arbitrary. Career titles are pretentiously euphemistic. A perfectly designed, perfectly decorated house does not make a home.

Pride encourages comparison, pettiness, and jealousy. Selfishness creates friction, confusion, and conflict. There is never enough applause. Today's peacock is tomorrow's feather duster.

Tax collectors and sinners, scribes and Pharisees, and peacocks and feather dusters are gathered listening to Jesus. They listen, because they sense there has to be something more. A better life has to be possible, even though they feel trapped the way they are.

Jesus tells a story: A man has two sons. The younger one is full of himself. He is the son of privilege and he does not even know it. This kid is so stuck up. His pulse quickens every time he looks in the mirror.

He is self-assured, arrogant, and sure that the only thing holding him back is the people around him who are not as smart as he is. His father is holding him back. His brother is holding him back. His mother is not mentioned, but she is holding him back.

He does not want to live in anyone's shadow. He assumes his judgment is superior to everyone else's. He has a misguided sense of self-sufficiency. He needs his

freedom and independence. He needs to see the world and spread his wings.

His father watches him in the field as he sort of gathers wheat. His son gleans as quickly as he can, because he has more important things to do. The rows he harvests look like the wind reaped them. A village could eat for a week on what is still in the ground.

When he reaches the end of a row, he turns and yells, "I'm finished. Look at all this wheat."

He knows nothing about value. He wastes everything he is given, and some things that were not his to waste. According to Jewish law, the second of two sons is entitled to one third of the estate at the father's death.

There is no provision for a son to say, "I wish you were already dead, so I could have what's coming."

The father would be within his rights to run the son off his farm without giving him anything. Most fathers would do just that. This father puts his own will into effect.

The far country is not kind to the prodigal. He begins what scripture calls reckless living. We get no details so our own dark fantasies kick in. We are free to imagine any forms of recklessness that sound appealing.

Whatever the details, the rich boy's life turns into a lost cause. As bad luck would have it, there is a severe famine.

The inheritance disappears. The boy works his way down the ladder of success until he takes the most menial job Jesus' kosher audience could imagine. He slops hogs.

The boy who once said, "Look at all this wheat" now asks "Who will feed me?"

Things were better in his father's house. The son eventually comes to his senses. The word in the gospel is a medical term. Luke, a physician, describes the response of a person who has awakened from a fainting spell. He comes to.

Sitting next to a hog trough, the boy finally asks, "What's the point?"

He is tired of wasting his life. He should be better than this. He will go home. The trip is harder than he imagined. He thinks about turning around. Why should his father take him back? But maybe the old man will strike a deal. The boy thinks about his father's anger, and, best case scenario, life as a hired hand.

But the father is waiting on the porch. He sees his son coming from a distance, and lifting his robe above his knees runs to greet him. The servants who are out in the field watch the old man run past them, his breath short, his eyes never wavering. By the time the younger son sees him, the father is embracing him, weeping down his neck.

The father says, "Bring the robe."

The son says, "I have sinned."

"Bring the ring. Bring the sandals."

"Against heaven and against you."

"Kill the fatted calf. Call the musicians."

"Do not take me back as a son, but as a hired hand."

The father whispers into his ear, "My son was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and now he's found."

The son does not get to give his speech, because his father cuts him off with forgiveness. The kiss, the symbol of acceptance, is offered before he can confess. The robe



is not that of a hired hand, but of the heir. The ring is the engraved signet ring, the power of attorney. The sandals are those of a son. The father puts no intermediate steps between forgiveness and celebration.

There is no, "Well, son, let's have some good behavior and see how it goes."

The father has been preparing this party for a long time. Hugs and forgiveness were always the plan. The boy finally sees what he has been given. God is bent on the party that God's house is meant to be.

So what happens the next day? What happens a year later? We hope that the prodigal understands that gratitude is better than arrogance, that he and his father focus less on their differences and more on their love, that he and his brother discover their different gifts are good gifts, and that he and his mother work to get her mentioned when their story is told. You hope that he is generous, compassionate, and humble. Not the fake "aw shucks, look how humble I am" humility, but the humility that is beyond selfishness, the humility that understands the emptiness of pride.

Frederick Buechner explains: "Humility is often confused with saying you're not much of a bridge player when you know perfectly well you are. Conscious or otherwise, this kind of humility is a form of gamesmanship. If you really aren't much of a bridge player, you're apt to be rather proud of yourself for admitting it so humbly. This kind of humility is a form of low comedy. True humility doesn't consist of thinking ill of yourself but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you would be apt to think of anybody else. Humility is the capacity for being



well than when your opponents do.”

God helps us enjoy other people’s well-played hands, others’ gifts, and others’ contributions. God helps us delight in praising, encouraging, and thanking. God helps us be magnanimous, generous, and human. God helps us act in ways that would puzzle the paparazzi if we had any, by acting with kindness.

In the movie *The Greatest Showman*, P.T. Barnum considers what remains in the rubble of his life when the fame fades away. After spending too many years chasing glory, he acknowledges the dark side of that pursuit. Returning to his senses and his family, he promises them “from now on, these eyes will not be blinded by the lights.”

Some of the lights that blind us are not spotlights. They are 40-watt bulbs. But we can give up our place as the center of our own attention. We can admit that from beginning to end, it is not about us.

Johann Sebastian Bach is remembered not only for writing beautiful music, but for writing on every manuscript *solī deo gloria*, glory to God alone. That seems grandiose, but everyone needs reminders that point us to what is bigger than we are, so that we do not give in to small lives of self-centeredness. We affirm our gifts and the gifts of others, appreciate genuine goodness wherever we find it, and marvel at beauty, large and small. We wake up to the truth that we live most abundantly in God’s kindness. We decide that we will not accept second best. We move toward God’s joy.

God waits with a better way. Our heavenly father races to embrace us. God hopes for the day we will come to our senses, and come home to grace.

God wants to whisper in our ear, “My child was lost, but has come home.”

You and I can go home again and again, to the home of knowing that God accepts us for who we are, loves us as we are, and forgives us when we do wrong. The difference between the far country and the father’s house is the difference between self-centeredness and celebration, between pride and joy, and between being a slave to our own selfishness and life as a child of God.

*sermon © Brett Younger*