

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable:

Then 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 slaves, "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 us 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.

'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." '

A letter to my brother -

You're back. You died when you left- choosing to cut yourself off - you were dead to me. You did it - oh how I remember that day; asking Father for your share of the inheritance. That ask was as good as wishing him dead so that you could go about living your life - partying, traveling, not respecting the ways of our life.

Oh how that act of taking what wasn't really yours and leaving - just taking off - how it shamed Father. How it shamed me. Do you have any idea what the hired hands have whispered behind our backs - how our neighbors look at us sideways? But Father, he wasn't ashamed. No, he was sad.

Not angry - he was mostly just sad that you'd left.

Father. You know Father and his strange ways - they all still talk about that one grape harvest where he paid everyone, *everyone* the same wage - no matter how long they worked that day. Where does he get these crazy ideas? It's as if he has an unlimited abundance to share - no thought for saving for the hard times to come.

No, '*care for the least of these*' he often tells me. "*There's enough in God's kingdom*" he says.

How I wish I handled the accounts around here. Then we'd have a few more barns full of our harvest for when we need it. But no, Father is not interested in storing up grain in barns. When I talk that way he looks at me with that same sad look, as if I, too, am missing the mark.

Father - he takes the time and hears the story of the needy, and somehow, though I don't quite understand it, he, we, do always have enough.

And this Father of ours, I think he's gotten even battier than when you were here - once, when traveling the road to Jericho - you know the road - it's dangerous. You have to keep to yourself, hurry along, always on the lookout for those thugs who want to take you down. One day, Father was on his way to Jericho, and seeing a man who

looked just a breath shy of dead, a Samaritan for goodness sake - Father stopped. Not only stopped and tended to his wounds, but loaded him on his donkey and took him to an inn. Oh Brother, I wonder about the judgment of this Father of ours. Making himself unclean for a person as good as dead, and a foreigner! Spending money on this stranger! And yet Father continues to stop and listen, to help out when he can.

I don't get it, don't know how he can expect us to be upright citizens with these crazy acts of compassion.

And do you know what he says to me?

Grace doesn't follow repentance — it makes repentance possible.

Grace doesn't follow repentance — it makes repentance possible!

What is that supposed to mean?

He tells me that repentance is more than upholding the law - so much more than that. Father says that repentance is sensing the Kingdom, seeing the kingdom of God, right here, in our midst - he tells me the kingdom reality is all around us.

Where does he get these ideas?

Once, when near dusk he noticed that one of our flock was missing - counting 99 as they came in for the night - and you know what he did? He left them. Just up and left the 99, and went searching for that one lost sheep. You'd think he struck it rich - when he came home that night, the lost one safely in his arms, he called us all together to rejoice with him!

It's as if the rule breakers, the ones who are lost - those are the ones that Father looks after the closest. They're who he pays careful attention to.

And another time, when Mother noticed that one of our silver coins was missing, they made such a ruckus when she found it, after sweeping and searching well after dark. They both wanted us all to rejoice!

Yes, Father says the strangest things - things like 'there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents'...

Where does he get these ideas?

Me? I just watch - keep my mouth shut, my head down, and do my work. And let me tell you, brother, I work - sunup to sun down, day in and day out. While you were never much of a worker, your leaving didn't make it easy on us. I'm tired brother, and fed up of this life.

But Father; he didn't seem to mind when you left. Wasn't ashamed or angry. He went about his work. When we were in the fields together sometimes I'd look up and see him scanning the horizon - always looking the way you'd left. He'd lean on his hoe and just watch. Oh the look on his face when he'd stop like that. It held such love, such hope. That face of his said so much - the lines of his brow, the creases around his mouth - they spoke of a love for you, a yearning to see you again - a faith that one day you'd come back through those fields; back home.

Yes, I've kept my head down - working like a dog. I don't try and talk with Father much anymore. I obey and do what he asks of me, and I keep my mouth shut. My anger is so great, it stews within me. I'm not sure he understands how hard I work to make this place run smoothly.

Now that I think of it though, when he says that crazy line to me, that -
Grace doesn't follow repentance — it makes repentance possible!

When he says that to me, he has that same look on his face - that look that holds love and hope - a yearning for something more for me. I've never thought much about that look on his face being for me too. That maybe I'm more than another slave - maybe he loves me for more than my long hours of labor.

And here we are. You, back from the dead. Can't say I'm happy to see you. I wish you'd just kept your sorry ass away. I still don't trust you any farther than I can throw you - which, as skinny as you are - might be a good ways right about now.

I had to hear about your return from one of the servants! Did anyone bother to come find me and tell me? You know, this place is rightfully mine. You got yours, well this is mine! But who knows what Father might do now that you're back, and he's treating you like royalty - like you're something special.

But you know what happened? While you were inside, dancing and feasting, Father came out to me; *came out to find me*.

He nearly begged me to come on in and join the party - to be joyful at your return.

And for the first time I spoke my mind. I let some of the avalanche of anger find its way out - oh it felt good to finally talk with him again, even if it was with harsh, bitter words.

And he told me another one of his crazy ideas - told me that all that's his is mine too - but he said it like it's not just for me. It's for all of us. He told me we have to rejoice - just like when he found the lost sheep and Mother found the coin way under the bed. Just like then, he said we need to stop what we're doing and celebrate. Celebrate. Made me think of all the times he's said to me 'Grace doesn't follow repentance — it makes repentance possible.'

I still don't get it, brother. I don't understand Father's ways. But I want to. I'm tired of living a life like a slave. I want to have some of the joy he talks about.

But - But it isn't fair.

The way Father takes care of the workers, that half dead Samaritan that he found in the ditch - even that one sheep, the one that snuck out and got lost - it isn't fair.

But maybe that grace he talks about - maybe it's not about being fair.

I don't know - it confuses me, but you're coming home, and Father's response - I wonder if he does it thinking that love comes first - and that maybe from that starting place, that love, you - and maybe me, too, will change?

Can Father be talking about me, too, when he says Grace doesn't follow repentance, it makes repentance possible?

It's late, and the harvest needs to be brought in. I've got an early start.

Signed, Your brother.

(Musical break)

Dear Older Brother,

I saw you come in. I saw you get a plate of food and sit in the corner, watching, that scowl etched on your face just like when I left.

Your face says it all - not trusting me for a moment. And I can't say I blame you. I came back because I was hungry. Not because I'm good. I came back because I was desperate - needing someplace to make enough to fill my belly. Look at me - I'm half dead. And by the look on your face, you wish me 6 feet under.

You know, when I started this journey home, I was coming back just because I needed someplace to get a meal. You know me - so does Father - he knows me better than anyone.

I hadn't changed much. I was going to use my same old lines, trying to con him into letting me come back. But something changed in me -

When he saw me coming across the fields, it was like he'd been waiting for me. Even before I finished my well rehearsed lines - even before I said my well practiced speech

- He wrapped me in those strong arms of his and told the staff to prepare a feast - exclaiming that this son of his that was dead is alive again; was lost and is found!

I'm still not sure about that. But I want to believe him. I want to believe I can be found. There's something infectious about Father's love - it makes me feel like maybe I do belong, like I maybe am worthy of love, even after disowning him, and you.

Maybe I can change. Father saw right through my deceitful ways, and still, he welcomed me home.

I wonder about that...

Thanks for stepping into the party tonight brother. Seeing you come in, well, it meant the world to me. Gives me a shred of hope that somehow we can find our way together.

As the servants were dressing me, washing the dust off my feet, I heard them laughing together, saying something I didn't quite understand. I asked them to repeat it - they said it's something Father has been talking about -

Grace doesn't follow repentance — it makes repentance possible.

Grace doesn't follow repentance — it makes repentance possible.

So much to think about. I never, in a million years thought I'd say it, but, you know, it feels good to be home.