

Real Relationships

Do you know the most popular TV show of 2018? The survey results are out and the winner is (drum roll).....Married at First Sight. A national average of 2 million Australians watch each episode and it's a ratings winner for Channel Nine. It is full of continual conflict and drama as the relational counsellors cast their eye over the comings and goings. It is typical reality TV. And Australians love it. We love the dramas and get absorbed in the twists and turns.

Today's sermon is based on Jesus' well known parable, The Parable of the Lost Son in Luke chapter 15. Here are family relationships. Fathers and Sons. We all have our experience of that kind of relationship, either directly because we are in one, or very closely because we live in families.

So let's notice firstly, this story is about relationships.

Verse 11. READ

You know for us Christians, our understanding of God is that he wants a two-way relationship with us. This makes Christianity different from so many other religions and faiths. God is not an arbitrary being with an unknown will, nor a remote figure with no emotions, nor a mystical idea completely separate from us. He's not carved stone or a block of wood. He's not part of nature, the sun, moon, stars or the earth. The living God shown us by Jesus that he is a heavenly Father who wants to have a personal relationship with us, his children. He wants it with each one of us directly. He doesn't want it with our parents or someone else. He wants it with us. And God doesn't have grandchildren – only children. He knows us by name. He loves us dearly. He communicates with us directly through his Word and by his Spirit.

The second point about this story is the character of the younger son – What a son.

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Verse 12 READ.

It is difficult for us Australians to really appreciate all the details of this story, because we don't understand how they did things in those days.

For example, a man could leave his belongings to his heirs by last will and testament. This was Old Testament law in which the eldest son got two thirds of the whole estate. But a man could also make gifts before he died and this gave him a free hand. But the main heir, the eldest, got nothing until the man died.

So the youngest son's request was not out of order. It could happen. It is just that he did it. He actually asked for his share.

But it also showed just what he thought of his family and his father in particular. It was as if he wished his father dead. "I want my inheritance now." The whole family's inheritance is reduced by one third. It brought disgrace to the family's name. And it would have shocked Jesus' hearers.

Then look at how he spent his precious inheritance. On personal pleasure and self indulgence. Verse 13 READ.

He had a great time.

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You know, hard though it is, this here is a picture of the way we human beings have turned our backs on God. From our first ancestors, Adam and Eve, who chose to ignore God's commands and decided to do what they wanted to do, because they thought they knew better – to every human being since – we live life with ourselves at the centre. We do what we choose to do and we seek to please ourselves. It's a tendency in us all. The Bible calls it 'sin'. Not a very popular word today – but it means 'disobedience to God'. Turning our backs on him.

And when you think about it, it's true. Look at the mess we've made of the world. The inequalities, the injustices, the outright violence, the greed, the addictions, the broken relationships. This all resonates with the Bible's view in Romans, chapter 3. 'For there is no difference, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.' 'There is no one righteous, no not one.' 'We have turned everyone to his own way.'

Then let's go back to the younger son where two disasters struck him. One after the other – one was his fault, one was not. He ran out of money and he ran into a famine. It made life almost unbearable.

Verse 14 READ.

He lacked even the basic necessities of life. This shows just how low life can go.

Verses 15,16. READ.

The pods here are the carob pods in the pig swill. Jews, remember, regard pigs as unclean and they will have nothing to do with them.

You can't get much lower than this. When there is nothing and nobody to hold onto, you just go down and down. And that's what happens to people. Life falls apart and the only way is down.

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But then something happens to this son. He finally comes to his senses.

Verse 17 READ.

He woke up to himself. Hardship has a wonderful way of making people face the true facts especially about themselves. This way of life he'd gone for was not working. This so called 'freedom' is really 'captivity'. He'd made a terrible mistake and was suffering the consequences. He had to do something about it.

Thirdly, we see the central character, the father, loving, patient, waiting, welcoming.

Verse 20 READ.

This father is remarkable. First he had agreed to his younger son's request for his share of the inheritance. He didn't stop him or try to dissuade him from doing it.

When people turn their back on God – he doesn't order us back into a relationship with him. He respects our choices, painful though they are to him.

Second the father here doesn't actively follow and search for his son. He doesn't go grab him by the scruff of the neck and march him back home. He lets him experience the consequences of his actions. The father waits and waits with eager anticipation. Why do you think that is?

There's something frightening about the freedom God gives us. He merely tells us the truth and leaves us to make of it what we will. The truth is God, our heavenly Father, loves us as we are, warts and all, and wants us to come back to a restored personal relationship with him.

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So too the father in this story lets the son discover the truth for himself and he had to find it in the pigsty.

It is interesting that Jesus does not say the son went back to the village or even to his own home – he says he went back to his father. It was that relationship that had to be restored.

And what a welcome the father gave his unworthy son. The son probably thought he'd get a lecture. Remember, verse 20B. READ

He saw his son while he was still a long way off. He'd been looking for him all the time the son had been away. He 'was filled with compassion for him'. This was his lost son – no matter what he'd done. He ran to his son – not something an elderly Jew would do. He threw his arms around him. He embraces him – you can't doubt his love. He kissed him. The word 'kissed' here means 'kissed him many times' or 'kissed him tenderly'.

Have you got the picture? This father loved his lost son and welcomed him back just as he was.

The son blurted out his speech to express his sinfulness and unworthiness. That is an important part of the story. Then the welcome celebration broke out.

Verse 22-24 READ.

The best robe was a sign of status and position.

The ring was a sign of authority.

The sandals? Why he had come back barefooted. The sandals meant he was free, not a servant.

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And the fatted calf? The special animal for the special occasion.

What a party!

And the father's joy overflows as he describes what has happened. From being dead to alive again. From lost to found.

Fourthly, in this story there is the third character, the elder son, lost too to his father's love.

Verses 25-32 READ.

Remember the context of this parable. Come back to verses 1 and 2 of this chapter. READ.

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law were critical of Jesus for the time and effort he gave to 'tax collectors and sinners'. The nation's spiritual leaders had so far shown no compassion to penitent sinners and here Jesus completes the lesson of his parable. The elder son is in the field, evidently at work, while all the celebrating gets under way.

His reaction was anger and he refused to have any part in the celebrations. The likeness to the Pharisees is unmistakable. Maybe this son would say to his father, 'this man receives sinners and eats with them.'

But note the father. He had already gone out to meet one son and now he goes out to plead with the other. What a father!

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And the elder son's torrent of words reflect his pent up feelings from years of feeling taken for granted. He saw himself as the model son, but it was all self-righteousness.

However the father's response is tender also, because both are sons and he loved them both. Indeed the property settlement stands, 'everything I have is yours'. Maybe he, like the Pharisees, did not realise the extent of his privileges. But when all was said and done the welcome for the younger son was right. Indeed 'we had to celebrate'. Joy is the only proper reaction. And notice the father does not speak now of 'my son', but 'this brother of yours'. The relationship could not be overlooked. It was still there. This wonderful thing has happened. The dead has come to life, the lost is found.'

And there the parable ends. We don't know the elder son's response. We don't know how the younger son fitted in. It's left hanging there. So the question for the first hearers, and for us today too, is which son are we like? Is it the elder son or the younger one? Probably most of us identify with the younger, but is there something of the elder in us too? God's fatherly love for us continues to challenge us.