

When You Don't Get What You Deserve

This parable of Jesus that we just read is probably most widely known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. And it is one of the most well-known parables of Jesus. It's right up there with the Parable of the Good Samaritan in that it is not uncommon to find it referenced in non-religious conversation.

It's of course a feel-good parable in that it celebrates the compassionate love that is at the heart of our understanding of God's grace and forgiveness. It's all about grace and forgiveness because of just how far off the rails the younger son goes in this story.

It's the younger of the 2 sons that this father had that gets the focus in most of this parable. It's this younger son who is portrayed as selfish, self-absorbed, immature and lacking all judgment in how to live responsibly. After all the story begins with the younger son going to his father one day to ask for his share of what will likely be his inheritance someday at the time of his father's death.

To be clear here, this son is essentially saying to his father, I wish you dead. Sons did not receive their share of an estate until the death of the father. There was no such thing as taking an advance on one's part of the estate settlement. It was beyond outrageous that the son would even consider making this request of his father, let alone actually going through with it and making the ask.

So this request of the younger son, which is how this parable begins, is stunning. But as the story unfolds, it is just the first of several stunning things that happens.

The second stunning thing that happens here is that the father actually agrees to grant his ungrateful son what he has requested. It would not have been at all out of line for the father to have been offended, hurt and outraged that his son essentially wishes him dead. It would have been well within his rights and role as a father to disown his son and shun him from the family over such an over-the-top request. Such a request would more likely result in total estrangement of the son from his family of origin. But no, in Jesus' story the father grants the request. Unbelievable!

In just the first two verses of this story, the son makes a stunning request and the father stunningly grants the stunning request. One might think that this is the basis for the title of this sermon today, "When you don't get what you deserve." Because you see, what the son deserved at this stage of his life was nothing near what he requested and then received. This younger son didn't get what he deserved by a long shot. But this is just the beginning of this tale. There is much more to come.

So the son, having been given this portion of his father's property, leaves his father and older brother behind and moves to a distant country. Remember that what was behind his initial request was in essence his desire that his father was as good as dead. And now with his departure to a distant land he is reinforcing that total disconnect from what was his family. It's as if they didn't exist anymore. He doesn't need them. He can and will make it on his own with all the resources he now has in his own possession. But does he take what he has received, what he didn't deserve in the first place, and use it as seed money to establish a new life of his own? Now that he was on his own, did he prudently use it until he could support himself for the long term? In a word, no. The way the story puts it, "he squandered his property in dissolute living."

I don't know about you, but the word squander is a really yucky and negative word to me. It implies that the misuse of something is not a mistake, not the result of a miscalculation or even not the result of misfortune. The misuse is intentional and pre-mediated. Squandering is the direct result of callousness, carelessness and lack of any sense of responsibility.

And then there is this other really negative word, dissolute, as in dissolute living. Now this is not a word that we hear very often in conversation and writing today. And yet it also packs a punch. Dissolute is one of those words that just sounds bad. Other translations of the Bible use words like wild, extravagant, riotous, loose, and reckless. One definition that adds to its seaminess is "indifferent to moral restraints; given to immoral or improper conduct." (dictionary.com)

So this is all to say that the story goes from bad to worse. First the son is cutting himself off from his family by prematurely taking what was to be his inheritance. Then he runs off and misuses it all. It all hits bottom for him when a famine hits that foreign land and he finds himself penniless and homeless leading him to take the lowliest job imaginable—feeding pigs.

As stunning as this story is to Jesus' listeners, this squandering and dissolute living leading to working in a pig sty would be further stunning to them. To the Jewish audience, pigs were among what are known as unclean animals—to be avoided at all costs. And now the younger brother is living among the pigs! Unbelievably repugnant.

It is in these very dire circumstances that this younger brother hits bottom. He then comes to his senses and realizes in what a predicament he is—a predicament of his own making by the way. And as he thinks about what he left behind, he realizes that even his father's hired hands are better off than he is. And he decides to go crawling back to his father to confess his sins and failures and to ask if he would take him in as a hired hand, knowing that he was no longer worthy to be his son.

It's at this point in the story that there is an amazing turn of events. As it turns out, the father who had been left behind and forgotten by his younger son, never had forgotten the boy and was even on the lookout for him. For he spots his son's return before the son realizes it. And his reaction is stunning. We read, "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. . . ." He runs to embrace him and kiss him, and while his son quickly blurts out his practiced confession that he is no longer worthy to be his son, it's as if the father doesn't even hear him due to his overwhelming joy at the return of his son. His joy is so great that he orders that a robe be put on the son, that the fatted calf be prepared for a celebration meal. "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." Let the celebration begin.

What a wonderful story of love and compassion, forgiveness and grace. It might be here at this point in the story that inspired the sermon title, "When you don't get what you deserve." This younger son surely deserved to be permanently estranged from his family of origin. He deserved to suffer the consequences of his dissolute living. He deserved all of that bad stuff because he had brought it on himself. He deserved all of these negative consequences and yet, when it was all over he didn't get what he deserved, he got so much more.

But this is not where Jesus ends the story. Part 3 of the story has to do with that older brother who has been silent and in the background to this point.

He comes into the story when he gets word while he is toiling in the field as he dutifully does every day, that back at the ranch headquarters a big party is underway. When he finds out the occasion of the party, that it's a celebration of the return of his dirty rotten scoundrel little brother who had

abandoned his father and him, he is filled with righteous indignation and rage and refuses to take part in the celebration. First off he is angry that his little brother didn't get what he deserves. But then the more he stewes and ponders the situation, he gets even angrier that not only did his little brother not get what he deserves, he (the older son) didn't get what he deserves as the steadfastly devoted son that he is and has been. This is how he expresses it. "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!"

It's clear in his response that he as the older son no longer considers the man who was his brother to be his brother when he refers to him as "your son" when talking to his father. It's also clear that he was aware of how that younger son had squandered that which his father had given him. And then there is a further reason why he is seething over all that had happened.

You see that in the culture of the time, as the oldest son, he was entitled to nearly all if not all of his father's estate upon the death of his father. The younger son didn't actually really have a claim on much of the property even at the time of his father's death. So for the father to have given his younger son so much more when he asked for it, the older brother could only see that what would have rightfully been his being given away inappropriately. So the younger son didn't get what he deserved. And the older son surely didn't get what he deserved.

As the story draws to a close, we don't really know whether or not the older brother came around to share the joy of his father at the return of the prodigal son. And we don't know whether or not the 2 sons ever reconciled upon the return of the younger son. It's left up to the listeners to Jesus' parable to ponder those questions.

When Jesus told parables, he invites the listener into the story, to identify with one or more of the people in the story. It was a way for Jesus to enter into the lives of people in a real way to get them to stop and think—really think about some of their assumptions.

Where do you find yourself fitting into this parable of the father with two sons?

As I mentioned at the outset, this is one of those parables that has taken on a life of its own outside of the church. You will sometimes hear a person talk about a time in his or her life when immaturity, selfishness and greed ruled and living was for solely for oneself. That same person will often reference a coming to his or her senses moment that became a turning point leading to a better, more balanced life. Maybe there are some here today who can resonate with this. And if so, praise God for God's compassion and grace that were at work.

But I would be remiss if I did not challenge us today to consider how it is that we may have, from time to time, been more in synch with the experience of the older son, feeling that somehow we haven't gotten what we feel we deserve, observing how others may have seemingly gotten away with this, that or the other and nevertheless been rewarded apparently.

Whether or not this may have been your experience, the clarion call in this parable is to consider how all of us, whether we relate to the older son, the younger son, or even the father, have been the recipient of God's compassion, love and grace more than we deserve to the point that all of us can embrace the reality of when we don't get what we deserve, but actually so much more.

At the very end of the parable, the father expresses the same compassion that he earlier extended to his younger son, now to his older son when he says, "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."

May we seek to be filled with that same compassion that sees joy in the return of those who have been away acknowledging that all of us do not get what we deserve because we indeed get way more than we deserve from God.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom
and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are God's judgments
and how inscrutable God's ways!
For from God, and through God,
and to God are all things.
To God be glory forever. Amen.

Rom. 11:33,36