

Restored to Wholeness
A Sermon
by Shelly Davis

Text: Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Isn't it great to know that there were plenty of dysfunctional families in Jesus' day too!?!

A younger child:

- who asks for his inheritance long before it's due
- then promptly runs off and squanders it,
- gets in waaaayyy over his head,
- finally comes to his senses and comes home with his proverbial tail between his legs
- AND gets rewarded with an unbelievably extravagant welcome home party

A father:

- embarrassed by his younger son's improprieties,
- wondering where oh where did he go wrong with this child of his,
- very possibly wrapped in a combination of shame and deep loss around his child's behavior
- overjoyed by seeing this child—whom he was convinced he would never see again—coming home—really, really, really coming home!
- acting crazily, recklessly, outrageously—throwing a party for the ages—
 - so that this son, and everyone around (this was a *huge* party)—

- so that *everyone* would know that coming home is cause for great celebration
- a parent caught in the vortex of sibling rivalry and resentment when his elder son is appalled, hurt, angry that his brother—
 - whom he now won't even call his brother,
 - his brother,
 - the one who messed up royally,
 - the one who disgraced their father and their entire family in any number of ways,
 - the one who *had* to come home because he screwed up soooo badly (out of money, starving)—
 - that's the one that gets the best party *ever!*

What's *fair* about that?! *Nothing!*

An eldest child:

- hard-working
- totally obedient
- carrying on the family name and tradition with honor
- never causing any problems
- always so good that he
 - felt like he rarely—and
 - perhaps actually
 - did not get the attention from his father that he too ached for
- justifiably outraged at his younger brother for disgracing their father and family

- justifiably outraged at his father for the outsized—*you've got to be kidding me*—party he chose to throw his brother simply for crawling back home
- so hurt, so confused, so mad that he can't even conceive of attending such a party

Where, I ask you, are *you* in this story?

- Are you the parent? I'm sure many of you who are parents can relate to the father in this parable on many levels.
- Are you the elder child?
 - The good daughter or son?
 - The one no one ever has to worry about?
 - The successful one?
 - The goody-two-shoes?
 - The one who never really has gotten much attention in the family because so much energy has had to go to a prodigal sibling?
- Are you the younger child?
 - You've done more than your share of foolish things.
 - Maybe you ran away, squandered an inheritance—whether that inheritance was material or a special talent you inherited or an education that others worked hard to provide for you—

- maybe you had to go through some very hard times before you realized all you had thrown away and knew that you needed to start over even if it meant turning back in humility and seeking forgiveness for all that foolishness and wrongdoing.

Every single character in this well-known parable of Jesus understood themselves to be seeking something and someone lost.

- The father was obviously seeking a child he had lost.
- The younger son may have been seeking the most:
 - a home,
 - a welcome,
 - a father who was lost to him because of his own decisions and choices.
- The elder son—
 - the totally faithful, loyal one—
 - suddenly—upon his wayward brother's return—found himself desperately seeking a number of things he believed he had lost:
 - recognition,
 - understanding,
 - visibility, and
 - perhaps the ability to forgive.

Every single character in this well-know parable of Jesus was seeking to be restored to wholeness.

- Seeking salvation.

- Seeking reconciliation.
- Seeking to be loved and to love.
- Seeking amazing grace.

Yet, what brings wholeness to one of us does not necessarily bring wholeness to another one of us.

- For the parent, a bit more wholeness looked like the return of a long-lost child.
- For the younger child, a bit more wholeness looked like the “*I can’t believe this is happening*” wide-open welcome of the parent he had disgraced and run away from.
- For the elder child, a bit more wholeness looked like—well, looked like and seemed like *something he never got*. Why?

The elder child in this parable seemed to believe wholeness was based on his own hard work and faithfulness.

- Wholeness, recognition, status, honor, are things you earned.
- If you don’t earn it, you don’t deserve it, and you shouldn’t get it.
- What’s fair is fair.
- And you especially shouldn’t get rewarded for doing the opposite of what you should have done!
- “For all these years I have been working like a slave for you and never disobeyed your command.”

- I've done everything right.
- I'm beyond reproach.
- I'm the perfect one.
- Yet you have never given me even a *small* party with my friends.
- What's wrong with this picture?!

The elder child in this parable—like so many of us—gets caught up in a measuring game.

- Keeping score.
- It's like an infinite loop of comparisons that have to result in someone—maybe you, maybe another—someone coming out on top and someone coming out on the bottom.
- And that must be the case because love:
 - whether it's the love of a parent,
 - the love of a sibling,
 - the love of one's self,
 - the love of God—
 - love, from this point of view is *a limited commodity*.
 - There's not enough of it to go around so
 - I want to be sure I get my fair share—
and
 - to be just as sure that another doesn't get more than they deserve either.

Yet, love—

- call it wholeness,
- call it amazing grace,
- call it salvation—

- love is *unlimited*.
- Love is outrageous.
- Love is amazing.
- Love is grace.
- Love is *prodigal*.
 - wastefully or recklessly extravagant
 - lavish
 - generous beyond imagining
- Love is *not* earned.
- Love is a *gift*. *Always a gift*.
- When love is given *or* received—*in any quantity*—
 - there is more, more, more of it to go around.

We humans are beings on a quest:

- a quest for wholeness,
- a quest for love,
- a quest for God.

We long for restoration, for reconciliation, for grace—

- even when we are too far from home to realize it,
- even when we are too wrapped up in our own scorekeeping to realize it,
- especially when we have one child pulling us in one direction and another child pulling us in the opposite direction

I also happen to believe that *our God longs for restoration, for reconciliation, for wholeness.*

- I believe God's heart is not as full or whole as it can be if one of us—even one of us—chooses to live as though it is possible to be apart from God.
- Like the parent's heart in this parable.

However, we can, and often do, live as though we are apart from God and

- I believe that pains God every bit as much as it pained that father in this parable when his younger son ran away and squandered all he had been given *AND*
- when his elder son could not find it within himself to extend forgiveness to his brother and share in the celebration of homecoming.

God is always on the watch.

- Searching the horizon for those who have turned around and started back home.
- Searching just outside any of God's houses for those who have great difficulty understanding that God's love is neither something to be earned or only available in limited quantities.

God is always on the watch.

And the celebrations and the feasting are prepared for *everyone.*

- Each one of us.
- The family—God's family;
- The Table—Christ's table;

- The Welcome Table—is not complete without your presence or my presence.

Younger child, elder child, middle child,
parent—

YES! Grace IS amazing!

Thanks be to God—

- our recklessly extravagant,
 - lavishly loving,
 - *prodigal* God.

Amen and Amen.