

Faith in Tough Times
When Saints Stumble:
Families, Estrangement, Healing, and Reconciliation
The United Church of Gainesville
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Luke 15: 11-14; Luke 15:20b-24

I bet that if we took a survey, we'd find that the two most popular parables of Jesus are both in the gospel of Luke – The Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

Those parables are so rich and familiar that sometimes by reading the entire story at once we lose ways they are supposed to surprise us, to be that unseen presence that rattles the doorknobs of our lives. So to start things off, here's a small slice of the prodigal, or as it is sometimes called, the parable of the two sons.

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger of the two 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...”

Imagine what it was like to hear this parable for the first time. Everything about this story is out of whack. An inheritance is supposed to come when a parent dies. It's a legacy to be treasured. Instead here this younger son overturns not only the natural progression of his family's story, but he also breaks his father's heart. He does it first by asking for his share of his father's estate now. Then he leaves.

Occasions like this cause life long rifts in families. I think that ruptures within families and dear friendships are some of the most difficult experiences of life. I imagine that probably everyone here has somewhere in our family or personal history, the experience of that heartbreaking slamming of the door of relationship - estrangement.

My mother's younger brother, my Uncle Harry, got his girlfriend pregnant at about age 16. Mind you that this was in Buhler, Kansas, a Mennonite pacifist town of 500 people prior to World War II. He married the girl; they had their son, and they moved from the farm in Kansas to California.

He then enlisted in the Army Air Force during World War II, was shot down over Germany, and held in a German POW camp for nine months. When he returned to California his wife left him. He was not able to see his son Ronnie the whole time Ronnie was growing up. Christmas and birthday presents Harry sent were returned. Visits were prohibited. My uncle Harry told stories of standing at chain link fence of Ronnie's high school athletic field watching Ronnie run track in the distance. But he was never allowed to approach or visit Ronnie.

I realize I do not have the details of what occurred immediately after the war, and I also understand that I will never have the whole

story. But in my experience, my Uncle Harry was not abusive or an addict. In fact he was the uncle I enjoyed the most in my family.

At some point after college Ronnie began a tentative re-connection with his father. They tried to put the broken pieces of their lives back together. Ronnie, about ten years older than me, even contacted my family when in his twenties he and his wife moved to New York City to become dancers. I thought they were the coolest people I knew.

But a whole chapter of his life and his father's life was never completely recovered. None of us as cousins, aunts and uncles and grandparents ever had any connection with Ronnie's childhood. The wounds of the estrangement between Harry and his son were never completely healed.

In my current life there is an issue of estrangement in my extended family. I can see now how it began two generations ago. This is a little complicated, so hang in there with me. In generation one, the Grandmother "Ann" quit speaking to her sister. Then in generation two Ann's daughter "Betty" quit speaking to her mother Ann about twenty years ago. Then Betty's daughter "Cindy", the third generation now, recently quit speaking to her father, and also refuses to let her father have any contact with her two year old daughter, his granddaughter "Diane." So you've got Ann, Betty, and Cindy not talking to a primary member of their family (I don't count Diane, because she's only two, but she's well on the path).

I do understand that there is another side to this issue of estrangement. Sometimes there are people so abusive or dysfunctional in our lives that to preserve our own health and well-being we have to cut them loose. I do not judge anyone who has had to break away from abuse. But today I want to talk about the places of estrangement that seem so needless.

Most of us acknowledge that our families are not like those of Ward and June Cleaver, or Ozzie and Harriet, or even the folks in the Publix Thanksgiving dinners. Most of us acknowledge that our friendships have their ups and downs.

So we live with realization that life breaks down as described in the beginning of the parable of the prodigal. I think Jesus lays out this story of the prodigal because it is a level of human nature that we all experience at some point in our lives. We sense that when this son leaves home, his journey is going to take a bad turn. Yet God has placed in our hearts hopes and dreams that never die.

Into this place of dreams comes the third section of the story of the prodigal son. I'm skipping the middle part of the story where the son loses all the money and decides to come home. In the third section, the father doesn't know anything of what the son has done. All the father sees is this, his son unexpectedly returning.

"From afar," Jesus continues, "his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

What follows are robes, rings, and a feast.

I believe this is what God's heart longs for: for the wayward to return home to make amends, for the one who was wronged to offer a full welcome, and for old wounds to be healed.

Yet God is realistic. We and God know that not all healings are complete. Even this healing story of the prodigal isn't all that everyone hoped for. There is the other, older brother, the loyal one who stayed home and worked, a good steward of his family's love and treasure. He comes home from work and is understandably exasperated and put out to see the party being thrown for the brother who betrayed his family's trust. While the father tries to reassure this older brother by saying, "My 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," my hunch is that this part of the story is far from over.

One of the worst things about any estrangement is that it cuts to the heart of life. Estrangement destroys what is most basic in our lives, our desire to love and be loved, and to believe that even if we screw up that love will not be withdrawn and communication will not be cut off and we won't lose our history, our family story. We can't always count on healing a relationship before it either goes too far to be fixed, or before, as in the case of my uncle and his son, whole chapters of life are forever lost.

I would say three things here about estrangement and healing, and they are quite simple. Point one: I believe that God calls us to do everything within our power to work through our issues and differences with one another without estrangement, without those complete shatterings of communication that scar the landscape of family and friendships. Let us never be the one who throws down the gauntlet, refusing to ever speak to one we loved.

If there is a pattern in your family history of people who turn their backs on one another, pay attention and do what you can to break this pattern. Let us not be the agents of estrangement. Its pain is too far reaching. And if we have been the agents of harm, like the prodigal son, and we realize our wrong, let us use whatever power or capacity within us to undue the harm we have done.

Second, if someone who has wronged us wants to mend what they have broken, I believe God calls us to listen and work with them to find ways to restore what can be salvaged of the relationship. Like the father in the story of the prodigal, we are called to welcome home those who have been lost. We cannot count on the fact that there will always be more time to fix what is now broken. People die, or move away. God did not create us to leave these things undone.

Third, I believe that God also calls us to recognize that there are relationships that cannot be healed. God is not all powerful to change the ways people behave. Neither are we. This is the hardest call for me to

accept. I have relationships I can't fix and they haunt me. Regardless of our best efforts, life's treasured connections sometimes break. When we have done all we humanly can, part of faith is accepting limitations as well as possibilities. If I cannot fix what is broken, God calls me to forgive, bless, and move on.

Today is All Saints day, the day to remember the saints of our lives. Our saints are not only the grand martyrs and miracle makers of the church. They are also the flawed and broken characters who have inhabited the households of our friendships and families. They have given and taken from us, and we have done the same. They, like we, have stumbled. It is God's hope, I believe, that when they stumble, we help them up, with healing memories and kind prayers. In Celtic tradition, those saints who have passed from this world are with us more strongly than ever in this time of year. Today, remember, accept, pray for and celebrate our saints, for in God's heaven the broken is made whole, the lost are found, and what was dead is again alive in a holy way.