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PERFUME IN THE RESTROOM  
Luke 15:11-32

There is a fascinating museum in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It has shelves that resemble those of a grocery store. But on those shelves are some unusual products such as a bottle of Clairol's A Touch Of Yogurt shampoo, Pepsi's AM Breakfast Cola, Colgate TV Dinners, Frito Lay lemonade, Fortune Snookies, which are fortune cookies for dogs and microwaveable scrambled eggs. You might also find in the museum a Smith and Wesson mountain bike. The museum is run by GfK Custom Research and is called The Museum of Failed Products. Yes, Smith and Wesson makes mountain bikes for law enforcement that are popular with many agencies, but when they tried to sell them to the public people just didn't buy it.

There's something sad about that museum. It reminds me of the island of misfit toys on the Rudolf The Red-Nosed Reindeer television show. What is particularly poignant about both the failed products and about the misfit toys is that sense of failure, not measuring up. I think that's something that all humans have at some level. It is why we cheer for the underdog. We feel like we're the underdog, the one who has failed, who doesn't measure up and is rejected.

Today we will consider the most famous and the most loved of Jesus' parables. It's the story of the Prodigal Son, and it speaks to that sense of failing and not quite fitting in. Shakespeare had many allusions to this parable in his plays. The great Dutch painter was fascinated by this story, and perhaps his greatest painting depicted it. Art historian Kenneth Clark says Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal Son" is "the greatest picture ever painted." Jakob Rosenberg and his colleagues in their book on Dutch art and architecture say the painting is a symbol of "the darkness of human existence illuminated by tenderness, of weary and sinful mankind taking refuge in the shelter of God's mercy." Let's examine this great story in Luke 15:11-32.

A FOOLISH SON MAKES FOOLISH CHOICES

As we have gone through the parables of Jesus I've noticed that the younger son looks bad in a couple of these stories. In Luke 12 we saw a greedy younger brother who tried to manipulate Jesus into telling his older brother to give little brother his share of the family estate immediately. In this story we see a younger brother who is brash, impatient, arrogant, disrespectful, and unwise. Being a younger brother I object to this negative characterization. I find it personally offensive and am

considering taking Jesus to court. Just kidding. I figure either Jesus' encounter with the real life greedy younger brother in Luke 12:13 was the inspiration for the knucklehead in this story or Jesus had an annoying younger brother.

In this story younger brother asks his dad to give him his share of the estate. In that day it was not unheard of for a father to divide up the family estate before he died, but it was not common. It most certainly was not in good taste for a son to ask his father to do so. That was considered disrespectful. Essentially the son is saying, "I know better how to run things than you do. I don't want to have to wait until you kick the bucket to get this thing on the right track." It says the son cares a whole lot more about the estate than about the dad. In this case, look how Jesus has the son phrase the request. It is abrupt and demanding.

I imagined saying such a thing to my mother, my lone surviving parent. How awful would it be if I demanded that she give me my inheritance while she's still alive. She has very little to begin with. If I did such a thing anyone today would think I am selfish and uncaring. They'd be right. That's how that younger brother was. But his father was quite different. Notice the last line of verse 12. "So he divided his property between them." The father shows remarkable humility, patience and love with his demanding son and agrees to give him his inheritance while the dad was still alive. But note that he didn't just give the younger son his share, he divided the property "between them." In other words, he gave the older brother his part of the inheritance too. This is important later on.

Verse 13 says "the younger son got together all he had." This is where little brother really goes stupid. In those days the estate consisted mostly of property. It was land and animals. Land was the source of wealth. It was passed on from generation to generation. God originally gave laws that would see to it that once the land was parceled out to families it would stay in families. Every 50 years it was supposed to revert to the family that originally owned it. When Jesus says the younger brother "got together all he had" he means he liquidated his assets. He sold the land and all the sheep and cattle that were on it, converting it cash. This was a classic example of killing the goose that laid the golden egg. In selling his assets he sold off the source of his wealth.

Jesus is depicting this young man as a person full of himself. He knows what he wants to do with his life. The last thing he wants is to be like his boring father who just lived on the land and never did anything really exciting. None of that for little brother. He wanted to have some fun. He wanted excitement. He wanted to live large. So the dolt heads off to Europe and begins to party like there is no

tomorrow. His story is a familiar one to anyone who follows sports. How many times have we seen pro athletes who have their absurd entourages, bedeck themselves with gold and jewelry, buy multiple expensive cars and homes and spend their nights partying and gambling, with the result that within a couple of years after their careers end they are flat broke. Several years ago Toby and I watched a national championship football game at the Rose Bowl in which Vince Young quarterbacked the University of Texas to a win against USC. He then was drafted and signed an NFL contract which paid him \$26 million. That led to items like spending \$5000 a week at the Cheesecake Factory and borrowing \$300,000 to throw himself a birthday party. He's broke today. Antoine Walker made \$110 million in the NBA. He bought custom Bentleys and Hummers, among others, a lavish jewelry collection and all the other typical accoutrements. He filed for bankruptcy in 2010. He blew through \$110 million!

Little brother in this story led the way when it comes to such stupidity. He spent his money on parties, fancy food, fast chariots, fast women and fast times. Like those stereotypical athletes of today the money ran out. To make things worse, just as he ran out of money a famine, a first century equivalent to a bad recession, hit.

Arrogant little brother hits bottom. The only work he can find is feeding pigs on a farm. You know that to ancient Jews pigs were unclean animals, so there was nothing worse than caring for hogs. I came across a story recently about a sewer diver named Brendan Walsh. His job is to wear a full contamination rubber dive suit and dive in raw sewage. It is so thick he cannot see anything, so he must do everything by feel. Personally I think that would be last on my list of jobs to choose from. In first century Israel it was caring for pigs. You could fall no lower. In the case of little brother he was paid so poorly he wished he could eat the slop they fed the pigs because it would have been better than the little he had to eat.

The end of verse 16 describes a typical consequence for anyone who follows the example of little brother. "No one gave him anything." What happened to all his "friends" that he partied with? Where were they? Nowhere to be found. Yeah, they loved being around him when the money and the good times flowed, but when the money ran out they dropped him as fast as you'd drop a red hot dish out of the oven. Suddenly his so-called friends weren't answering his calls.

It is at that point that according to verse 17 the young man in the story "came to his senses." Literally the Greek text says he came to himself. He woke up. He took a good hard look at the misery he had brought on himself and recognized how utterly foolish he was. He knew that the men who worked for his dad even as day laborers

had it better than he did. It was time to swallow his pride, admit he had failed spectacularly and that he was humbled and sorry, and ask his dad if he could find anyway to hire him as one of those lowest level employees.

As Jesus was telling this story those in his audience were totally with him. They all agreed that this is exactly what happens to foolish young men who live dissipated lives, who don't listen to what God says you should do or have respect for their elders. Proverbs 10:8 says "the wise in heart accepts commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin." This young man was a chattering fool. He had no interest in his father's wisdom. He only wanted the thrill of having fun in the moment. He didn't listen to Proverbs 21:17, which says, "He who loves pleasure will become poor." He went his own way, and as the Proverb said he came to ruin. Yes, everyone listening to Jesus would have approved of the story so far. Be arrogant and brash like that guy, do not respect your father, live only for the pleasure of the moment and this is exactly what you should expect.

#### A FATHER SHOCKS EVERYONE

Have you ever had a situation where you had a difficult conversation that you knew was going to happen? What did you do? Likely you thought through what you were going to say. You probably imagined how the conversation would go. You imagined how the other person would respond to your words, then you had to come up with a way to answer whatever that person said. Once you had that all worked through you likely rehearsed your speech repeatedly, refining it as you went. That's exactly what Jesus depicted the young man doing. He imagines himself appearing before his dad and apologizing. He would admit that he was in the wrong, he had totally failed and didn't even have a right to be called the man's son anymore. He would beg for a job and a relationship with his dad only as one of his employees.

Verse 20 tells us the young man carries out his plan. Hat in hand he heads home to eat a lifetime supply of humble pie. What do you suppose Jesus' audience was expecting to happen? There was an ancient rabbinic story that predated Jesus that was very much like this one. A rebellious young son takes his money and goes away blowing it all on a wild lifestyle. In that version the son returns and the father essentially says, "You've made your choice, now live with the consequences. You chose to go live like a pig, so go live with your pigs. You made your bed, now lie in it." At this point the Pharisees and other acceptable people listening to Jesus are thinking, "Oh, I know this story. I've heard this one before." They think they know what is going to happen because it is what *should* happen. The brash young man should get the comeuppance he deserved. Deuteronomy 21:20-21 says that if

parents have a stubborn and rebellious son that goes totally out of control they should take him to the elders of the town and say, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard." Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death." Jesus' audience was expecting something like that.

That's not what happened in Jesus' story. Have you ever seen the movie *Jerry Maguire*? In it Jerry, the main character ends up estranged from his wife Dorothy. But he comes to realize that he loves his wife and can't bear to be without her. He returns home and in front of her support group tells her that he loves her and that she completes him. She then utters what the American Film Institute says is one of the top 100 movie lines of all time. She says, "You had me at 'hello.'" That's kind of what happens with the father in Jesus' story. Actually the son didn't even get to hello. The dad saw him coming from a long way off. Everyone is expecting him to be aloof, waiting for an apology, but that doesn't happen. As soon as he realizes it is his son who is coming he dashes out of the house and sprints to meet him.

The son starts into his prepared speech but never gets to finish it. Before he can tell dad he deserves only to be an employee his dad has servants bringing out the finest clothes for his son. He puts the family ring on his finger and orders a feast prepared. He is going to have a party because his son, the one he thought he would never see again, had come home. It was time to celebrate.

#### A BROTHER PREFERS FAIRNESS OVER FRATERNITY

Big brother finally makes his appearance in the story in verse 25. He has been out in the fields overseeing the affairs of the estate. As he arrives back home he finds a huge party is in progress. No party had been planned. There was no special occasion to call for such a bash. He wants to know what's going on. When one of the servants tells him it is because his jerk of a little brother has come back, broke of course, and his dad was throwing him a huge welcome home party, he gets mad.

I can understand how he feels. Compare the two boys. Big brother was respectful to dad. He has been patient. He has stayed at home and worked hard. He has been diligent and faithful and he has clearly operated in line with dad's wishes. Little brother has been insufferable. He was arrogant, disrespectful and unloving toward dad and probably big brother as well. He was a know it all. He was foolish beyond description and threw away a large part of the family's wealth. To make matters worse, he didn't lose it through making some bad investments or through having a business fail. He blew it all by living an ungodly and wild life. He wasted it all.

So what should happen? Big brother should be the star. He should be celebrated. He should be patted on the back. They should give parties in his honor, because he had earned it. Frankly little brother should pay, don't you think? Shouldn't there be some consequence for his choices? The right thing to do is for dad to say something along the lines of "Well, son, I'm glad you've come to your senses at last, but you have done some terrible things. You need to prove yourself because I don't want to see something like this happen again. This whole experience has been terribly painful for all of us. And it has been very costly. So you're going to have some consequences. I will give you the opportunity over time to prove that you really have changed. Don't throw the opportunity away."

Doesn't that seem like the right thing to do? After all, if you just accept the guy back there will be no consequences. Won't that encourage him and others like him to repeat his mistakes? The right thing to do is to make sure he feels the pain he has caused others and learns the lessons he needs to learn isn't it?

If a party is going to be thrown for anyone, shouldn't it be for faithful big brother who has been there all along? In fact, big brother points this out. He tells Dad that he has worked faithfully all these years. Sure, Dad gave him his portion of the inheritance already, but he has always followed Dad's lead. He says, "All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders." And what did he get? Did Dad even so much as give him a goat to kill so he could have the equivalent of a poor man's luau with his friends? No. He got no pats on the back, no credit and approval for his faithfulness. He got nothing. Now his wastrel brother comes home after disgracing his father and blowing a big part of the family estate and you're going to throw him a party? That's just wrong.

But in the story the father tells the son he's looking at it all wrong. He has always loved the older brother and everything he had belonged to him. In fact, remember that Dad had already given the older brother his share of the inheritance, which was all that they had! Had the younger brother fouled up royally? No question. No one would deny that. But Dad had thought he had lost him for good. He was as good as dead. And now he was back. That was more important than anything else. What was lost had been found, and that's what matters.

## IMPLICATIONS

### GOD DEFINES GRACE

Remember the context of this passage. It all started with the respectable people and the religious leaders bring critical of Jesus because he was wildly popular with the most undesirable people in all Israel and welcomed them into relationship with

him. Last week we saw two parables that made the point that yes, those people are sinful and lost, but that God's nature is to care about such people and rescue them. While the religious people might despise them, God loves them.

This parable advances the ball further down the field. Frankly, the father in this story appears in normal human reasoning to be almost extreme. Recently Laurie and I had a conversation with our kids that was encouraging for me. I had begun to feel like maybe I've just become a crotchety old guy who says, "Why in my day we would never have allowed something like that." What I refer to is the behavior of some children and their parents' apparent acceptance of it. I have been astounded by some things I have seen. One of the classics was a time Laurie and I were at a restaurant and were seated at a table next to two moms that between them had a veritable platoon of children. Well, actually there were only 5, but it seemed like a lot more. These kids were totally uncontrolled. They were loud, obnoxious, disrespectful, whiny and rambunctious. Their table looked a bit like Japan after the tsunami water receded. It was a scene of massive devastation. At one point one of them, who was whining that she wanted to leave, just laid down on the floor in the aisle between our tables. As the restaurant employees came by they had to carefully step around her because she was in the way. And her mother didn't do or say a thing! After they finally left our waitress came to our table and I said, "Wow, it got a lot quieter in here when that group left." She shook her head and said something along the lines of, "You have no idea. That was just horrendous." I've seen stuff like that a lot and find myself saying, "What's with parents these days? They don't seem to discipline their children at all." I feared it was just old guy syndrome, but my kids said they see it too.

So here's the thing. When Dad doesn't discipline the kids, when he just smiles at junior's outlandish behavior and pats him on the head, junior becomes an unholy terror that is a bane to all around him. So doesn't it make sense that if the Heavenly Father does the same thing he's going to get the same result? In this story God runs counter to all we think of as wise and good and lavishes his love on a person who deserves just the opposite. It makes no sense to us. Isn't God a God of order and justice and holiness?

Yes, he certainly is a God of justice and holiness. But Jesus wants us to understand that we have no idea how unlimited his love and grace is. His love as depicted in this story is almost scandalous and outrageous. Jesus claims that doing things the way we think they ought to be done never revolutionized any lives, but that God's ridiculous, seemingly crazy love, is the one hope not only of saving people but of transforming their lives.

You get a glimpse of God's patience and love in 1 Timothy 1:13-16. Paul wrote, "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy, because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life." Did you catch that? Unlimited patience for the worst of sinners. Whoever you are, whatever you've done, you have not outdone Paul. He claimed he was the worst. He was as bad as it gets. But God showed him grace. Unlimited patience means there is no limit. No matter how long the prodigal was gone, the Father was there anxious to welcome him.

This is spectacular news for us, for all of us humans have a couple of powerful desires. One is for what we like to think of as a second chance, such as the dolt little brother was given in this story. Only it's really for more than just a second chance. In our case we would need to have many more chances than just a second one, and given another opportunity we would just fail again. What we really long for is for someone to look past our continual failings and to love us anyway.

The great poet John Donne said of the prodigal, "his case is ours." We, all of us, in our honest moments know that inside we see that something is amiss with us, that there is in us something worthy of rejection and condemnation. It's what we should expect from God. In his book titled *With*, Skye Jethani related what happened in some meetings he had with Christian college students. These kids all grew up in Christian homes and went to good churches. But they all agreed on one thing: they knew that God was disappointed with them. All of them knew they should be something better than they were and they all felt that God, at best, tolerated them. We all feel that.

Yet we long for him to somehow look past that and love us anyway. That's why this parable is so deeply powerful, for Jesus says in God we find not the condemnation we deserve and expect, but a Father running to us to embrace us. 1 John 4:19 says, "We love because he first loved us." Back up one verse and look at verse 18. It says, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear." God's perfect love, when we grasp it, drives fear out.



Another longing we have is for reconciliation. We are like that broken wayward son, far from home, knowing he doesn't deserve to be taken back by his father, admitting to himself that he can't even ask for such a thing, but secretly inside hoping that somehow his dad might take accept him nonetheless. We want to come home and be restored.

Laurie and I recently bought a DVD of one of my favorite movies, one I've alluded to a number of times. I bring it up because it is so powerful to me. That movie is *Field of Dreams*. It is the somewhat strange story of Ray Kinsella, a farmer in Iowa who hears a voice uttering the now famous line, "If you build it, he will come" as he sees a vision of a baseball field on his farm. The movie is full of echoes and traces of themes about regret and redemption. Ray builds the baseball field and to his shock a baseball player does indeed come. The player is long dead Shoeless Joe Jackson, his father's favorite player, a player of incredible ability who lost his career when he was caught in the Black Sox game fixing scandal. Ray thinks that he has been called upon to build the field so Joe can come and play the game he loved once again. It is only at the end of the movie that the central character and the audience discovers that the one who would come to the field wasn't Joe at all, but Ray's now deceased father. Ray was the brash younger son, the prodigal, who rejected his father and who came to regret his actions, but by that time his father had died. He felt the weight of his terrible act and longed for the impossible, to be reconciled to his own father. In the final scene, miraculously his father, now young and healthy again, shows up at the field. Ray sees him and says to his wife, "If you build it he will come. This was for my dad." Joe Jackson hears him and says, "No Ray. It was for you." Ray is able to at last reconcile to his father.

There's an odd thing about that movie. It shouldn't have that big of an impact on me. Yes, it has a baseball theme, but there are a lot of baseball movies that I am not especially affected by. So why does this one have such an emotional punch for me? I was never estranged from my dad. You might think it's because I miss my dad and wish I could see him again, and I do, but this movie affected me before my dad died. I never needed to be reconciled to him because my dad always loved me. So what's the story?

Shortly before the end of the movie one of the characters, Terrence Mann, tells Ray that people will pay to come see his field. He utters a powerful line when he says, "Money they have. It's peace they lack." And in the final scene cars are streaming to the field from miles away, bringing people looking for peace. Their dream is the dream of reconciliation that will bring peace to their souls.

In the heart of every single one of us there is a longing for reconciliation. We may not even know what it is or who we need to be reconciled to. But the reason I love that film is that it says in a beautiful way that we can never be at peace until we are reconciled. We need to be reconciled to God. We are all the wayward son who needs to come home, longs to come home, and doesn't deserve it.

This magnificent parable says that there is a heavenly Father from whom we have been estranged, a Father who by all rights should have nothing to do with us, but that though it makes no sense at all, our Father is desperate for us to come home, and when we do he will run to embrace us, throw the finest robe on us and celebrate in a party to end all parties!

### WE SHOULD JOIN THE PARTY

That message of the gracious and forgiving Father is powerful. But it wasn't the final point of this story. We must go back to the situation that motivated Jesus to tell this story. It was the expression of disgust and disdain by the religious elite of Jesus' day for the failed and fallen people who were thronging around him.

No one likes to identify with the older brother in this story, and yet, his thinking is consistent with how the whole world thinks. It's all about what you deserve. The older brother deserved praise and reward, his jerk of a little brother deserved nothing but condemnation. That's how things are in this world. In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Philip Yancey wrote that we live in a world where we breathe in the air of ungrace. It is our context, so pervasive that we don't even notice it. That's what the older brother exhibited. Ungrace is all about everyone getting exactly what they deserve.

Jesus came to bring grace into this world. We are to join him. Laurie is kind of funny about this, but often after she has met nature's call in the toilet room she sprays perfume there. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 2:14 that God "always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the aroma of the knowledge of him." Through us he spreads this aroma everywhere. We are to spray the perfume of grace into this stinky world. We live in a world that reeks of ungrace, and we are to bring into the distinct, the shocking aroma of grace.

Pastor and author Mark Buchanan in an article in *Leadership* journal related something that happened in his church. A woman named Wanda called his church one day asking if she could see a pastor. Wanda, Mark wrote, "was not our kind of people." Her life had been destroyed by alcohol and she was at the bottom. Mark and another pastor met with her and told her about the woman Jesus met at a well

in Samaria, a woman like Wanda. Wanda, like that woman, said she wanted the living water that Jesus offered, so she confessed and surrendered to Jesus. Mark's colleague said to her, "Now Wanda, Sunday will be your first time in church. Don't feel you have to fit in right away. You can sit in back if you like, come late, leave early, whatever is comfortable." She looked at him and said, "Why would I do that? I've been waiting for this all my life." That Sunday she showed up early, sat at the front, loudly agreed with everything Mark said and was the last to leave. The next Sunday same thing except she brought a friend, one of her kind of people. That Sunday Mark preached about being a servant, about how if you've experienced the grace of God you'll want to serve others. It was also communion Sunday. They called their leaders the "Servant Leadership Team." He asked the servant leaders to come and help serve communion. That day only two were present. They straggled to the front. All Wanda heard was that Mark asked for servants to come help serve. She'd tasted the grace of Jesus, so she wanted to serve. She walked right up to serve Communion with the other two servants. Awkward. What would Mark do? He said he flinched, but then he remembered the woman at the home of Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7. She loved much because she was forgiven much. He remembered Jesus' words to Simon, "do you see this woman?" He said it was like Jesus was saying to him, "Do you see this woman?" He leaned over to Wanda and said, "Since this is your first time doing communion, do you mind if I help?" And he and Wanda served communion. He said the best part was the faces of the people of his church. He said not one flinched. They saw her.