

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Who Do We Hang Out With?

Who in this story do you relate to? I would like to tell you a little about what Charles McCollough has to say about his work portraying the parable.¹ His first sculpture shows the prodigal squandering his inheritance. His dissolute living is shown by a bottle of wine in one hand, and a bag of money in another. Arrogant, he creates wreckage all around him without noticing.

The second figure shows the prodigal in the pig sty. His emaciated figure shows famine in the land, and his dead-end condition. He has fallen so low he is jealous of the pig. He is lost. The pig stares back as if to ask, “What’s your problem?” The pig is not lost. He knows who he is and is content.

The third sculpture shows the prodigal in his father’s embrace. He is surprised by the welcome. He does not even get to fully confess his sin, and collapses in his father’s strong arms. The fourth sculpture shows the elder son scowling. He refuses to go into the party. The father embraces him with one arm and gestures with the other, “All I have is yours.”

The father, round and prosperous, has been shamed by both sons: the younger by asking for his inheritance before his death, the elder by refusing to join

¹ The Art of Parables: Reinterpreting the Teaching Stories of Jesus in Art and Sculpture, Charles McCulloch, pg 105-107.

the celebration. Yet, the father welcomes both sons- one starved, shamed and lost; the other well-fed, law-abiding, and obedient- but resenting his father's forgiveness. Yet the father judges neither and invites both to the banquet. The father wants to hang out with both his sons. This is Charles McCullough's interpretation, and who he relates to in the story.

Who in this story do you relate to? On one level this story could be an old story about God and God's forgiveness. Most of the time, preachers focus on the overwhelming love and forgiveness the father shows to his younger son, who returns repentant from his disobedience and disrespect. The father represents God who loves us, no matter where we are or what we have done, all we need do is return home, and the forgiveness is ours. Certainly this is a good lesson.

On another level it is a timeless story about something that is unfortunately too familiar, a dysfunctional family. Perhaps some of us have been prodigals and have returned to our families or to God and received forgiveness. Perhaps some of us have been a parent who welcomed a prodigal home. It is a warm and fuzzy story showing that reconciliation is a possibility. Certainly this is a good lesson.

So it makes it hard for some of us to admit if we relate to the elder brother and feel sorry for him. I mean, it just doesn't seem fair. He spent all that time working for his father, but the younger brother gets the party. And some of us may have problems relating to this story at all. Some of us may have been only

children, some of us may have been perfectly well behaved, and some of us may not be parents. So then what can we get from this story?

Perhaps we need to go back to the beginning- what is the purpose of this story? Who is it for? The reading begins with: “all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So tax collectors and other generic sinners are there, and the Pharisees and scribes are complaining about Jesus.

There may be “brothers”, “sons” and “fathers” in the crowd, but not necessarily related to each other. Perhaps this is a story about individuals reconciling with God, or dysfunctional families reconciling, perhaps it is even about “brothers” reconciling with each other, but perhaps it is more. Perhaps it is about “All that is mine is yours.”

Jesus is the one who is standing in the midst of the brothers who are not reconciled. Perhaps he is telling them that what he has: God, and all that is God’s, is present to everyone, all the time, regardless of our status, regardless of our obedience or disobedience, regardless of our hard work. But how can that be? Don’t we have to earn our inheritance? Don’t we have to be good?

No. That's the point. It is radical, overwhelming, unconditional. It is beyond what we can imagine. God is just bigger than that. So how do we make sense of it?

Let's go back to that family. The elder son complains- you never gave me a goat to have a party with my friends! He feels unappreciated. He feels taken for granted. He feels like it is all about him. The younger son- give me what is mine. I want to use it how I see fit. I want to enjoy it for myself. I want to go and party. He feels it is all about him.

Before the younger son left the homestead, there was no relationship. They did not party together. If they did, why would the youngest son leave, and why would the older son complain that he never got to party with his friends? They took each other for granted, there was no us, there were only three of them living under one roof. So I have to ask, who did they hang out with? Certainly not each other; they did not party together, they did not even know each other. Now, when the youngest brother returns, the father celebrates, but not the older brother. Why should he? There is no relationship between them at all.

It is the same in any family, however we imagine it. The tax collectors and sinners, and Pharisees and scribes, did not hang out together. They hung out with people just like them. There was no relationship between them. And yet Jesus said, "All that is mine is yours." They were all God's children, equally.

And here at Hillcrest we are all God's children, equally. God resides here with us and everything we have is God's and God has allowed us to use it. The relationship we each here have with God is radical, overwhelming, unconditional. This is a message we need to take to the people who are not here, we need to invite them to come and share it. All that is God's is theirs too. We need to go and hang out with them, so they will come and hang out with us.

But we also need to share it with each other, first. When my mother and uncle and aunt were here they felt incredibly welcomed. My uncle said that if he didn't live in Ohio, he would want to worship here. That shows what a wonderful welcome you extend to visitors. But there are people here who do not really know each other.

Remember our parable. We need be proactive to keep our Hillcrest family strong. Before we can truly welcome new members or even some who left, but want to come home, we have to be sure we know each other. We have to be in relationship with each other to keep our members from wandering. It takes effort to create and keep our relationships strong. We all must take responsibility to be in relationship with each other. We cannot take each other for granted. In order to be a strong family that can grow and welcome others, we have to hang out together.

So I invite you today, we all need to go and find someone we do not know and spend some time hanging out together.

