

Luke 15:11-32  
Real Men Love People  
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Whether we believe it or not, the truth is, families do not leave their homes for a strange, foreign country, unless there is something very wrong in their homeland. That is the truth. I spent some time at the southern border between Mexico and the United States. Every single person I talked with, who was trying to get into the U.S., would rather have stayed home. They loved their homes, their communities, their families, and their friends. In fact, most of them clung to the hope that one day they would go back home, surrounded by the people they love, having the life they had planned.

I can't imagine what it would be like to be a parent, with children to love and care for, in a place where there was no way to provide food and shelter for them or where violence was part of everyday life. Parents trying to protect their children from starvation, abuse, gangs, and wars will do all kinds of things we wouldn't dream of doing. They will make choices you and I would never want to make.

They will leave their homes to go to a strange, foreign country. They will endanger their lives crossing the desert, sell their souls to people who promise they can help them across the border, and yes, risk having their children taken away from them. These are the people who are coming to our country for help. Whether we agree with the decisions of the parents or not, we have a moral obligation to protect the children. Ripping children from their parents as a way of deterring people from coming to this country is immoral. It is not biblical and, as Christians, we cannot be silent about it.

We cannot allow ourselves to sit in judgement of parents who, I believe, are doing the best they can. We cannot believe the narrative that there is something to fear from immigrants and refugees. We cannot allow our hearts to be hardened toward our neighbors who are suffering. We are called to love...to love with the kind of love the author of Luke wrote about in today's text. This kind of love isn't affected by the decisions the person makes or whether we agree with those decisions. This love is the kind of love I talk about every week when I give the benediction, "Go from this place, knowing you are loved by a God whose love never quits, never goes away, and never, ever gives up on you." That kind of love is what today's story calls us to.

In order for us to really understand the text, it is important to understand the ways in which the father in the story veered from the culture of the day. These departures from the norm were significant. The world of the father and his two sons was a patriarchal world in which the father was in charge of maintaining the family's honor in the community. It was a world where men were men and women and children knew their place. Children did not insult their fathers by asking them for their inheritance and fathers certainly did not give it to them. It was shameful. The community would have been talking about this family. And the talk would not have been flattering. The father's actions would have caused him to lose the respect of other men because, clearly, the father in the story could not keep his family in line.

Jesus told today's story as a way of helping his followers understand the value God places on every single human being and as a way of underscoring the important role men have in families, and in the world, for bringing about the world God desires. With great power comes great responsibility...in our world, men have traditionally held the power. While this story was told 2000 years ago, it's lesson is still relevant today.

As I mentioned to the children this morning, looking for the missing voices in the text is one way of seeing the Bible in a new way. So, this morning I invite you to think about the story of the Forgiving Father and His Two Sons from the perspective of the mother.

The 2 best days of my life: the birthday of my oldest son, Ari and the birthday of his younger brother, Eli.

Both were born in the spring. Spring was not the ideal time to have a baby...so much to do around here, but God decides when a baby is born. Ari and Eli were healthy, happy little boys. They used to play for hours together. They had many adventures...Eli would get into trouble and Ari would rescue him. Ari was Eli's hero. They were inseparable, mostly because Eli followed Ari everywhere. That seems like so long ago...

The boys used to be so much alike, but as they grew older, they grew apart. I saw it happening about the time Eli became a teenager. Because Ari was the oldest, he had privileges that Eli didn't have. On the other hand, he had more responsibilities too. Eli wanted to do everything his brother did way before he was old enough. It got so that everyday there was an argument about what Eli could and could not do. Everything was unfair, nobody loved him and he would be better off without any of us. Oh, it broke my heart.

My husband, Gabe, and I talked about it at night when the boys were in bed. Gabe thought it was just a phase, that Eli would outgrow all of it. He said that it was our job to love him through it. Gabe is so good at that. He's a lover of people, especially his children. You know, most fathers would just tell their children to knock off the fighting and do what they're told, but not Gabe. He never tired of talking to them, explaining why this thing or another is the way it is.

One day just after Eli turned 16, he went to Gabe and asked for his share of the inheritance. He was planning to take it and leave. He was serious. Eli said our lives were not what he wanted for his life. It was true...he really did think he would be better off without us! I begged Gabe not to give it to him, to talk some sense into him. I told him to *make* Eli stay home if he had to. Gabe said that Eli had to be free to make his own decisions, even if we didn't agree with them and even if they were hurtful.

He said that sometimes the best a parent can do is pray.

That was just like Gabe...always assuming that things would work out just the way they should, thinking the best of people, his heart full of love, confident love was enough. I was angry and frustrated. And I had never been so sad and afraid in my life. I couldn't believe it...my child was really leaving. The next day, Eli left. He took what was his and left. I will never forget standing in the doorway, watching him literally walk out of my life. It was a horrible day.

AND the day had just started....

When Ari got up and heard what had happened, he was furious. I have never seen anyone so mad in all my life. I didn't think words like that could come from the mouth of a child of mine! Ari yelled at his dad, saying, "Do you know what this means? Why am I the only one who is mad here? He has insulted you! By doing this he has looked you square in the eye and said that he would be better off if you were dead. Doesn't that seem wrong to you? The whole country is going to be talking about what a fool you are, and I don't disagree."

Gabe tried to explain to Ari that each of us has to work things out for ourselves, that Eli wasn't trying to hurt anyone, he must be really hurting and confused himself to want to go away like that.

Well, let me tell you, that was the wrong thing to say.

Ari lost it!

He thundered, “What about me?” Who do you think is going to do all of the work around here now? It’s not like he was a huge help when he was here, but he was a warm body!” Well, at that point, Gabe had finally had enough. There was a flash of anger on his face and then nothing but sadness.

Gabe walked toward Ari, took him by the shoulders, looked him right in the eyes and said, “Don’t you forget for one minute who you are talking to. I am your father. The reason that you have a house to live in, clothes on your back, sandals on your feet and servants, that by the way, do most of the work around this property that **I own**, is because of me. I have given you everything. He lowered his voice a little and his face softened, then he said, “and there’s something else that you should know...there is nothing that I wouldn’t do for you or your brother. I love you...more than you can ever know.

Ari didn’t say another word. He jerked himself away from Gabe and stormed out. Gabe sat right there in the kitchen and stared out the window for the rest of the day. I mean it...he didn’t move. He just sat and watched. I served lunch and dinner around him. When the sun set, and he could see no more, he got up and went to bed. For the first time that night, I heard my husband cry.

The next day, Ari and Gabe still didn’t speak to one another. Ari went about his business, checking on the servants, overseeing the care of the animals. Gabe piddled around the barn. About every 5 minutes, though, I saw him come out and look over in the direction that Eli had gone. I think he just kept hoping he would catch a glimpse of him coming over the hill. That didn’t happen. I couldn’t believe how much he had aged overnight. He looked so frail.

The days went on like this for weeks...little by little Gabe and Ari started talking to each other again. Every once in a while, they joked back and forth about this cow or that chicken. We have a

rooster that just despises Gabe. Every time Gabe walks through the farmyard, it attacks him. Gabe jokes that the rooster is going to make a great stew. Even supper time had a sense of normalcy about it. Most nights, I even get through the meal without crying ...most nights. Weeks turned into months. Nobody had heard from Eli. Honestly, I hadn't really expected to hear anything, but a mother can hope.

One day, Gabe was out by the barn, helping one of the servants put away the mules. Ari was still in the field and I was in the kitchen. All of a sudden, I saw Gabe drop what he was doing and run across the front yard. I have to tell you, it was quite a sight. Where we come from, men, especially men like Gabe do not run! Servants run...their masters do not. Gabe was running though. He was running so fast that he had to hike up his robe so as not to trip on it. The servants were running after him, shouting.

Just as I was about to holler out at him, I turned and saw what, or should I say, who he was running toward.

It was Eli.

I saw him just in time to see Gabe throw his arms around him and kiss him. I could tell that Eli was talking to his dad. He was talking really fast. Gabe turned to the servants who had chased after him and said something. They started hurrying in my direction. One of them came into the house, grabbed a robe, the family ring, and a pair of sandals.

The other took off for the field, with the Smith and Wesson (which had been carefully stored in the gun safe). A few minutes later, in the pasture, I heard a shot. In the door burst Gabe with Eli...Gabe looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, "Let's eat and celebrate! This son of mine was dead and is now alive again, he was lost and is found." I rushed to Eli and I held him in my arms.

I let go of Eli just as I saw Ari coming across the yard from the field. He looked puzzled as he approached the servants. Everyone was excited. Ari stopped one of the servants and must have asked him what was going on. I don't know exactly what he said, but Ari's face went dark.

Gabe went out to talk to Ari. I went outside too. I stood by the door, listening. Gabe asked Ari to come into the house and see his brother and get washed up so that we could eat and welcome his brother back.

Ari refused...I heard him say to his father, "I have done everything that you have ever asked me to do. I have been here while he has been God knows where. I was there when that calf you had killed was born. I made sure it was fed and taken care of. For what? You have never thrown me a party. You have never even encouraged me to have an inkling of a life of my own. Yet, he goes off and parties like it's 1999 and then waltzes back in and that's good with you? You didn't just lose a son, you've lost your mind."

Ari was so hurt. I wanted to stop the hurting, but I didn't know how. Gabe pleaded with Ari. He told him, "Your brother's return doesn't change how I feel about you. I love you...everything I have is yours. Your brother has made mistakes. We can't undo what he has done. His mistakes have cost him dearly. His money is gone. He has been living with pigs, Ari, PIGS. He has lost everything, including himself. Now it is time to welcome him home. Now it is time to show him who he is...my child, your brother."

Gabe said, "Ari, my child, come inside and see your brother. I could tell that Ari was thinking...he was thinking hard."

I was praying, Gabe is right...sometimes that's all a parent can do.